



Onmyoji and Tengoku Eyes:

Hide and Seek in the
Wintry Mountains

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Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes: Hide and Seek in the Wintry Mountains

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Prologue: Demon

“ONE...two...three...four... Nine, ten! Are you ready?”

“Not yet!” a young voice called in the distance.

Whenever just the two of us play hide-and-seek tag, it's my responsibility as his older brother to be “it”—to be the “demon.”

In Japanese hide-and-seek, the person who is “it” is referred to as the “demon” and counts while the other players find places to hide. Once the others shout that they are ready, the demon can open their eyes, and the hunt begins.

“Eleven...twelve...thirteen... Are you ready?”

“Not yeet!”

But...I think I've been left behind completely. Somehow, it feels as though that reply of “Ready!” will never come at all.

“**LISTEN** to me real well, kiddos. First-graders must never, ever play tag in the mountains. If yeh do, a *real* demon will come to get yeh. And if yeh're ever in the mountains and hear a voice asking, ‘Are yeh ready?’, make sure yeh always, always reply with ‘Not yet!’ That voice yeh hear isn't a person but a demon, y'see. If yeh ever reply with ‘Ready!’...the demon will take yeh away.”

Chapter 1: Misato Miyazawa

THE young onmyoji wrapped his fingers around Ryouji Karino's wrists, then frowned deeply. "I think you should stay in bed for another three days. There's no way you can do night shifts with a pulse like that," he said, frowning.

"Ugh, for real?" huffed Ryouji in disappointment.

The tepid climate of fall was fully upon them, and the once green-covered mountains boasted an expanse of brown leaves whose trees lamented the lack of summer heat. It was the time of year when the warm sensation of snuggling up in bed grew more comforting with each passing day, but quite frankly, Ryouji was sick of lying down.

He sat cross-legged on his futon in the living room of the Karino estate's main house. The room was the same as ever—aside from the addition of a heated *kotatsu* table that was spread over the futon. Ryouji thrust his legs under it as he impatiently waited for his lodger to finish examining him. "Y'know, I didn't realize you'd studied Chinese medicine, too," he commented, studying the long, elegant fingers bearing down on his wrists.

When Ryouji raised his head, his boarder's unblemished, gentle face was right in front of him. The man's smooth, white cheeks were well-defined, and his beautiful eyelashes cast a long shadow over them as he directed his gaze downward. The faint crimson of fading autumnal daylight filtered through the window and onto the androgynous young man where he kneeled beside Ryouji. His neat, black ponytail shone in its glow. His name was Misato Miyazawa, and he was an onmyoji born to a family who claimed to carry the blood of a dragon god. Currently, he was living in an outbuilding on the Karino property and working at the Tomoe Town Hall.

"Both Onmyodo and Chinese medicine are built on the same principle—yin and yang. Even if I'm not an expert, we were at least taught the basics," Misato explained. His pale fingertips were surprisingly warm where they pressed against Ryouji's wrists in

search of his pulse.

“You’re real warm,” murmured Ryouji absentmindedly.

“No, I’m not,” Misato countered with a sigh. “You’re just ridiculously cold.”

“Whatever. Anyway, it sure is an eye-opener to hear what’s considered the *basics* in the Narukami family. They musta nailed that crap directly into your skull.”

“Exactly. And guess what else they taught us?” Misato glowered, his words dripping with acidity. “Not to ever act like savages, *even* if someone we’re protecting is in danger. I’d never do anything like...oh, I don’t know, grapple with a bloodthirsty spirit with my *bare hands*.” He always got rather tetchy when the topic turned to his origins. His fingers tightened around Ryouji’s wrists, squeezing as a wrinkle formed between his eyebrows. “I’m serious, Ryouji,” he croaked, his eyes flicking upward and capturing Ryouji in a sharp stare. It was as if he knew exactly what his landlord was thinking. “I’m still extremely angry about how reckless you were.”

“Sheesh, dude. What could I have done differently? I’m no good at making talismans and all that.” Ryouji shrugged, looking up at the ceiling as though to escape Misato’s furious, obsidian irises.

Ryouji Karino was twenty-four years old and worked primarily as a psychic (with a little bartending on the side). He had spiky, bleached blond hair and nearly always wore his trademark faintly tinted sunglasses. Despite his thuggish appearance, he was a Shugendo monk, and his supernatural vision had earned him the nickname “Tengu Eyes.” At the moment, however, with his sunglasses placed next to his pillow, he was just a normal guy with nowhere to go other than his own bed.

He’d done something pretty irresponsible on a job a few days prior: he’d hurled himself directly at a local god while protecting a client. He’d been hired expressly as a bodyguard and thus successfully honored the client’s request—at a price. The following day, he was bedbound, and so he’d remained ever since. It was his fourth day of being holed up in the living room. He considered himself pretty well rested, but his attempt to get up and be productive had been wholly thwarted by his watchful lodger. When Misato found him out of bed, he was immediately escorted back whence he came.

“Either way, your pulse is still way too weak. Being so reckless will harm your innate spirit—in other words, you’re chipping away

at your lifespan. If you don't take proper care of yourself now, you'll be a decrepit old man before you know it," Misato warned. He finally relinquished Ryouji's wrists and rose to his feet, tucking the hair that had come loose from his ponytail behind his ears. His ebony hair gleamed, its sheen seeming to glimmer as it swayed with his movement. "But you know I'm a terrible cook, so I can't promise you a balanced meal, I'm afraid. To make up for it, I'll make you a medicinal compound and some talisman tea. If you want to get out of bed quicker, you *will* drink them."

Ryouji groaned. "Nah, you gotta be kiddin'. That stuff tastes like ass. In fact, are you sure drinkin' it won't have the opposite effect? It's gonna take years off my life!"

Talisman tea was what it sounded like; it was made by burning a talisman and then mixing the ashes with hot water. Ryouji was fully aware of the tea's extraordinary medical benefits (especially when brewed by a genuine onmyoji), but unfortunately, the taste was awful. Revolting, even.

"If you don't like it, I have a compelling suggestion for you: never, ever do anything so dangerous ever again," Misato implored him, kneeling in front of Ryouji again to face him head-on.

Ryouji may have been older than Misato, but he felt very much as though he were being scolded by a parent. *I can tell he's used to telling people off. It's actually kinda impressive.*

After a few beats of Ryouji's slack-jawed silence, Misato tilted his head, raising one eyebrow. "What's wrong?" he asked dubiously, thrown by the change in Ryouji's demeanor.

"I dunno, I was just thinkin'...you sure are good at taking care of other people, huh?"

Misato's expression softened only to be replaced by an even more confused quirk to his brow. "You think so?" He pondered for a moment. "I used to look after my little brother a lot whenever he got sick or hurt. That might be why."

Oh, yeah—his half-brother, right? If I remember correctly, guy's a lot younger than Misato.

"Ahh, the little'un. I remember now." Ryouji nodded, his curiosity appeased. Although Misato had been born to a family of high status, he was an illegitimate son, so the title of heir fell to his younger brother instead. From the few anecdotes that Ryouji had heard, it seemed their relationship was far from that of typical siblings; Misato had practically raised the kid.

But ultimately, it was none of Ryouji's business. If Misato didn't want to talk about the past, it wasn't his place to pry. With that thought in mind, he quickly changed the subject. "Anyway, it's super kind of ya to do all this for me. My nurse in shining armor." He grinned, imparting a teasing lilt to his tone in an effort to defuse the awkward tension in the air. True enough, Misato had been an excellent nurse to him as he slept for much of the past four days.

Although they both lived on the same estate, Misato was paying Ryouji board, and they resided in completely different buildings, only sharing the kitchen and bathroom. It wasn't as though they lived *together*. Even so, Misato seemed to be seriously worried about Ryouji, and being the target of his undivided attention was a little embarrassing.

"Yeah, well...it's for my sake, not yours," Misato mumbled, a little hesitant.

"Huh? Y'mean, like...if I die, you'll be homeless again? I guess that would put you in a pretty tight spot," Ryouji muttered with a nod.

Misato was living from paycheck to paycheck. He could hardly even afford the shockingly cheap rent that Ryouji asked of him—a measly thirty thousand yen per month, all utilities included. He often fell behind on his payments, too. If he were forced to move out of their home, it would be difficult for him to find somewhere suitable to stay.

As Ryouji silently wriggled backward into his futon, smirking up at the ceiling, out of the corner of his eye he happened to catch Misato smiling fondly.

"That's part of it, sure. But...I want you to be happy and healthy. Really, it's got nothing to do with you. It's an entirely selfish desire, so I won't pretend I'm doing all of this for your sake," Misato said quietly, his words punctuated by another smile.

"Misato..." marveled Ryouji. "You got some sorta archive of smart-soundin' quotes hiding away in that brain of yours?"

"It's just what my mother taught me." Misato shrugged. "She used to say, 'You'd do well to remember that wanting to help someone is never for their sake. You're the one who wants it—not them.' She believed that saying you're doing something for someone else's sake is the same as blaming them for your own actions. I guess she was just trying to instill a sense of responsibility in me, but what she said has stuck with me all the way into adulthood."

“Whoa. Your mom sounds super cool. By the way, did she...?” He trailed off, suddenly realizing what he was asking. Quickly, he averted his gaze and snapped his mouth shut. When Misato had spoken about his childhood before, he’d never mentioned his mother.

Yet Misato simply continued to smile awkwardly, his eyes still trained on Ryouji. “Right. She was with us in Izumo, but...by the time I was in middle school, she was gone.” Misato’s enigmatic smile made what went unsaid very clear: “Don’t pry any further than this.”

“Right,” Ryouji replied casually, snuggling down into his futon and letting their conversation fizzle out on purpose.

“Okay. I’m going to start getting lunch ready,” Misato said with a nod. Ever so quietly he padded over the *tatami* mats and out through the door. The way he silently glided everywhere with perfect balance was further evidence that he’d been raised by one of the most influential families in Japan; the habit had been hammered into him since he first learned how to crawl, no doubt.

Ryouji listened for the glass door to the kitchen to open and close, then let a few moments of silence pass before throwing his blanket off to stare up at the ceiling again.

Misato Miyazawa. He was a usually somewhat scatterbrained civil servant with graceful, feminine features and a hairstyle that was rather unconventional for the workplace. A few months previous, however, his moods had been far more unpredictable—it didn’t take much for him to spiral into a depression. One such trigger was mention of the name most psychics knew him by: Misato Narukami, illegitimate son of the Narukami family... The Snake Eater.

He was regarded as little more than a deep, dark secret that the family endeavored to keep hidden.

WHEN Katsuki Narukami was little, he always played with his older brother. Hide-and-seek tag was his favorite game.

He was crouching in an out-of-the-way corner of the huge estate, holding his breath as he waited for his brother to inevitably find him.

“Found you!” exclaimed a high-pitched, gentle voice yet unbroken by age.

Katsuki looked up to see his brother advancing toward him with outstretched hands. “Eeeeeek!” he yelped, barely running a few paces before Misato’s arms clamped down around him. Misato was five years older than him, so the “tag” portion never took long.

“Gotcha!” Misato declared, laughing brightly. That was always Katsuki’s favorite part of the game.

Only once had his brother ever said, “I’ll hide this time. You can be the demon.”

Katsuki had tried his hardest to find Misato, but being so much younger, he hadn’t had the foggiest idea where to look. In the end, he gave up, plopped down on the ground, and wailed his lungs out.

Misato had rushed out from an unknown location to comfort Katsuki, who threw his arms around and clung to his older brother, crying incessantly. Misato gently stroked the top of his head and murmured a sincere promise to him: “I’m sorry... I won’t do that again.”

Less than ten years after he made that promise, Misato disappeared without a trace. With Misato on the run, Katsuki was made the demon once more—and had so remained ever since.

TOMOE was a small city in the northern region of Hiroshima Prefecture. For the most part, it was the same as any other countryside town; however, Tomoe Town Hall was home to one of the...*stranger* governmental departments throughout Japan. It was called the Abnormal Disaster Unit and part of the Crisis Management Division. It dealt with disturbances that were scientifically inexplicable—in other words, the supernatural.

The bell signaling the beginning of lunchtime had sounded about five minutes before. A young male employee popped his head through the time-worn, wooden sliding door to the office of the Abnormal Disaster Unit. The paint on the door was peeling away, much like the paint throughout the rest of the office. The man strode into the room and cheerily approached Misato.

“Hey, Miyazawa. Want some *kashiwa mochi*?”

Misato raised his head at the sound of his name, tearing

himself away from the daunting pile of paperwork in front of him. He looked up to see a familiar face: Takayuki Hirose, his old high school classmate who just so happened to have ended up as his colleague at Town Hall.

The building where the Abnormal Disaster Unit was located was tattered and shabby, and even more so in their dim, sunless corner office. It was as if management were ashamed of them and had purposefully isolated the social outcasts of the local government in a secluded crevice of the department. Nevertheless, Hirose had taken to eating lunch with Misato in the unit's office on a daily basis; he said he liked that nobody was around to bother them there.

Misato had joined the Abnormal Disaster Unit as an occult specialist earlier that year. He called himself an onmyoji as a matter of convenience, but more specifically he was an expert in folklore and superstitions; religions such as Shintoism, Buddhism, and Onmyodo; and the exercise of spiritual power. He'd polished his skills at a Shintoist university before successfully finding work as a civil servant, a job in which he could wield his supernatural gifts for the public good. It was uncommon for male employees of town halls to have long hair, but in Misato's case, it wasn't simply a matter of taste; his hair was instrumental in a secret ritual of his.

Considering Misato's peculiar background and appearance, as well as the fact that he was a stranger to the town of Tomoe, he was extremely grateful to have Hirose as a friend—especially because Hirose was from a different department. Those in other divisions were not typically so understanding of the work Misato did.

"Oh, um...no, thanks. I don't really like sweets..." said Misato as he looked Hirose up and down. As usual, Hirose was holding the two bento boxes that he ordered from the office catering service every morning. He was also, however, carrying a huge plastic bag. "Actually...why do you even have so much? Is that *all* kashiwa mochi?" Misato asked, glancing at the snack-stuffed bag with disgust. As he craned his neck forward, his well-combed, neat ponytail cascaded across the back of his work-approved navy blue blazer.

Hirose nodded solemnly in reply. "An old lady who lives in one of the houses we manage gave them to me. Made a few too many, apparently," he explained, depositing one of the lunches on Misato's desk. He was still wearing his bright red, black-lined

government jacket, its fabric strangely vibrant for a work uniform.

Hirose worked in the Housing Maintenance Unit in the Property Administration Division, so his job was to look after the public housing in town. And he had apparently no choice but to accept the hospitality of kind citizens while on his rounds to inform the populace about the importance of winter-proofing water pipes. “I mean, look at all this,” he said, opening the bag in Misato’s face.

Misato peered inside to see balls of mochi that had been filled with red bean paste and cocooned in brown leaves. Although kashiwa mochi were—as their name suggested—normally wrapped in kashiwa oak leaves, the people of northern Hiroshima Prefecture often folded round chinaroot leaves around the treat instead. Chinaroot, or *Smilax glabra* as it was scientifically known, was easily harvested in early summer, and its leaves were often pickled in salt for culinary usage. In and around Tomoe, kashiwa mochi were a popular snack for a number of occasions throughout the year: Obon Festival, New Year’s, and several fall festivals—not just for Children’s Day as was customary in most of Japan. The old lady had most likely prepared them for an upcoming autumnal celebration.

“Was it in Tomoe District? I betcha anythin’ that’ll be Mrs. Sumita. Sounds like she’s taken a likin’ to yeh as well, Hirose,” said a man with a large build who sat at the desk across from Misato’s. His name was Ookubo, and he was the chief priest of a Shinto shrine in Tomoe District and another member of the Abnormal Disaster Unit. He gave them a hearty smile as he spoke; it seemed he knew the generous mochi-making lady very well. “Yeh should share ’em with yer colleagues back in yer unit.”

“I already did. This is what’s left *after* everyone took their share. Do you want some too, Ookubo? Take as many as you can, honestly,” Hirose prompted, handing Ookubo the plastic bag.

“Well then. Don’t mind if I do.” Ookubo smiled, accepted the bag, and immediately began to hand the mochi out to everyone in the office—whether they liked it or not. Misato watched with a sidelong glance as he retrieved his thermos flask of tea from the corner of the room and popped open the bento that Hirose had brought him.

Misato couldn’t stomach anything that contained red bean filling. Ookubo knew that, which was probably why he was so hastily distributing the mochi to everyone else. There *was* a certain sweet-toothed someone recuperating back at home who would

probably rejoice if Misato tucked a few mochi in his bag, but he felt a little awkward asking for some when he wasn't going to eat any.

"You can't eat sweet stuff, right, Miyazawa?" Hirose asked, filling the mug he kept in the office with tea and seating himself at an empty desk. Misato nodded, and Hirose looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully as he popped the lid off of his own bento box. "It's not like I *can't* eat them, but three is more than enough for me. It's a different story for my mom though; she never, ever eats anything with red bean filling. Adzuki beans are actually banned in her family. They even make *sekihan* using red rice instead of adzuki beans," Hirose explained casually. He spoke as though what he said was no more than regular small talk, but his wording piqued Misato's interest.

"They're...*banned*? And it's not because someone has an allergy or something?" Misato asked, his tone curious as his fingers stilled around his chopsticks.

"Nope. *Ooh*, wait... This is right up your alley, Miyazawa. So—in my mom's hometown, none of them will eat red bean mochi. The story goes that long, long ago, someone ate some adzuki beans that had been intended as an offering to an *azukiarai*. That earned them a pretty nasty curse, and tumors grew all over their body. It sounds like it was super gross," Hirose said with a playful grimace.

The employees in Misato's department genuinely and routinely performed acts which were considered no more than make-believe by many members of the public: exorcism, purification, curse redirection... It was normal for most people to brush such practices aside with no more than a dubious look, but in Hirose's case, he truly didn't seem to mind discussion about otherworldly phenomena.

"Cursed by an *azukiarai*, huh? I've never heard that one before," Misato remarked.

Azukiarai were a type of well-known *yokai* about which countless folktales had been passed down all throughout Japan. The supernatural creatures could sometimes be heard at night washing adzuki beans near rivers or in gardens—and that was about as threatening as they got. While numerous cases had been reported of such yokai engaging in deals with humans for adzuki beans or red bean mochi, Misato hadn't heard of any such incidents occurring in Hiroshima Prefecture.

"Either way, nothing's ever happened to me, so it's probably

just a family superstition.” Hirose shrugged.

“Hirose...” began Misato with a wry smile, watching him unconcernedly wolf down some salmon from his bento box. “You’re actually pretty unflappable.” When they’d first crossed paths again, Misato got the impression that Hirose was avoiding him. He’d assumed it was due to the same judgment he experienced from their other colleagues on account of his unusual hairstyle and peculiar profession, yet before he knew it, Hirose seemed to have grown rather attached to the Abnormal Disaster Unit.

“You think so?”

Modern-day people were very quick to dismiss folklore and legends as mere superstition. As such, those working in the Abnormal Disaster Unit did not receive much formal recognition for their contributions to society. Not to mention the fact that depictions of psychics in the media were dominated by conmen who frightened others for a living; it reflected badly on the industry.

Hirose went silent for a moment, resting his chopsticks in his lunch box, then hummed in thought. “I don’t mean to drag the mood down or anything, but...” He paused. Other members of the unit were sitting nearby, each in their own little bubble as they took their lunch break. There were ten of them in total, and around half were specialists like Misato. “You hear different azukiarai legends pretty much anywhere you go in the country, right? Well, at my elementary school, several people claimed to have seen one at a nearby river. So in about fifth grade, our whole class went to check it out.”

“That’s actually pretty cool,” Misato said, impressed. Their instructor must have been quite the eccentric to arrange yokai hunting as an educational activity.

“Yup. Our teacher somehow got permission to take us out of school, and we waited on the riverbank until sundown. We brought tape recorders and everything.”

“Sounds like a health and safety nightmare,” Misato chuckled.

Even if they were the oldest kids in the school, an entire class of students visiting a riverbank at night was a huge risk. Although, according to Hirose, their class had only consisted of around ten children, the danger of any number of accidents remained. “Could never see it happening nowadays, could you?” agreed Hirose.

“Anyway, we were waiting out there in the dark, expecting

some kind of yokai to show up so we could report our findings. I remember being super nervous, but in the end, the ‘azukiarai’ turned out to be pebbles rattling in the current along the riverbed.” He laughed. “First we split up into groups to investigate the details of the tale, then reconvened to plan how, when, and where we could best verify the yokai’s existence. That was when we carried out the actual survey. Then, a few days after gathering our information, we had a class debate before settling on an answer. It was a serious class project, y’know? We had loads of fun.

“We set up tape recorders in several locations and hid in an inconspicuous tent made out of blackout curtains, waiting. With the information we gleaned in our preliminary investigation, we had an idea of when it would appear,” he explained. “I *did* think it sounded kinda like pebbles, and we were pretty much certain after checking the tapes, so we all came to the same conclusion. In all honesty, I was a little bit disappointed. Life is never as exciting as the legends make it out to be.”

By the age of ten or eleven, children had a pretty good grip on reality. It sounded as though everyone in Hirose’s class had easily arrived at the more logical conclusion. Misato could then understand why the teacher had organized the outing in the first place: if the students researched and debunked the rumors themselves, the potential creature would no longer be a big, scary “unknown” to them.

Sounds like he had a really good teacher, Misato thought, neatly placing his chopsticks down before sipping his tea.

Alas, the story didn’t end there.

“One kid was out sick the day we went to the river, you see...” continued Hirose. “She’d really been looking forward to it, so she was disappointed, to say the least. She ended up going to the river alone a few days later to check it out for herself.”

“Urk. I don’t like where this is heading...” Misato said with a pained smile.

“Right? She even heard the song the azukiarai was rumored to sing. It caused a huge commotion at school. We were at each other’s throats arguing about it! The song went something like ‘Now, shall I wash some beans or eat some people?’ She must’ve been scared stiff,” Hirose noted softly, swallowing a mouthful of tea. It seemed the child had been only further isolated from her peers by the fact that all of her classmates had already written off the ghostly

experience as no more than pebbles in the river.

“Our teacher defined ‘the occult’ as hidden phenomena that can’t be physically observed. Basically, no matter how much we investigated and disproved the yokai’s existence, the possibility that it was just hiding from us would always come into play,” Hirose recalled. “It sure made me wonder whether yokai really analyze the situation that much, but whatever. Like...I dunno... If we try to investigate them, they can just hide—and maybe they appear again when no one’s around. Because it’s impossible to prove whether they actually exist or not, ghosts are intrinsically this abstract, ambiguous concept. So our investigation was pointless, no matter how many times we tried. In the end, everyone was pretty much satisfied with that answer.” He shrugged. “...Wait. Thinking back on it now, it doesn’t make much sense.”

Misato shook his head. “No, I think it makes perfect sense. Your teacher couldn’t have handled it better.”

There were things in the world that could not be explained by modern science—and it was easy to nonchalantly brush off such unaccountable happenings with that reasoning alone. However, that teacher had hoped to show the students that the occult wasn’t quite so shallow as they thought—that there was more to consider. Dismissing something as “Too hard to think about” was not at all the same as calling something inexplicable. The “inexplicable” approach was about acceptance; it was welcoming the fact that some phenomena could simultaneously both exist and not exist.

If said phenomena possessed mass, energy, or other properties of physical matter, it was entirely possible that they could be proved or disproved one day. However, the beings that Misato and other exorcists often encountered did not meet those criteria. Their bodies could not be discerned via any quantifiable method. The only evidence of their actuality was that humans could *feel* them in the air—or humans with any sort of spiritual prowess could, rather. Such entities were so intangible that they were akin to hallucinations; their very essence was subjective, providing no sure way to substantiate their existence. That was what spirits were.

If one attempted to seriously study yokai or specters or the like, in most cases, they would simply vanish—the endeavor as futile as trying to catch a cloud of mist. They appeared only when they could not be objectively observed, and the soul who was at the mercy of their ghostly mischief, wrath, or blessing was left only

with that lingering effect in the spirit's wake.

"But y'know... If I took *you* along with me, it'd all be over in seconds. If it's real, you'll see the yokai right away!" exclaimed Hirose.

"I'm actually not so sure about that," Misato demurred, closing the lid on his empty bento box to stare up at the ceiling. He eyed the clock on the wall. The minute hand was pointing straight down; already half of their lunch break was gone. "Mediums don't *physically* see or hear spirits. Even if you get four or five of us together, we're probably not all seeing the same thing," he clarified. "Something similar must've happened with that river. Because as long as the tale of the azukiarai is passed down and people think that it might be real, then the creature exists. But if everyone forgets about the tale, the azukiarai will disappear, too; nobody remembers that it's there, after all. That's why even if we Spirit Hunters went to check it out, we wouldn't be able to confirm whether it actually exists or not. Like... Hmm. Sorry. It's really difficult to explain."

An apple was always an apple, regardless of where in the world it was seen. It was unheard of, however, for someone in Europe or the Americas to witness yokai such as *kappa*, for example; nor did the exorcists there ever have to deal with *inugami*. Everyone perceived spirits differently, and because none of those perceptions was necessarily correct or incorrect, no one could say definitively that their causes were real.

"We're getting deep into some philosophical kinda stuff here," Hirose snorted. "What was that quote? 'I think, therefore I am'?"

"Right. I guess it's the same sort of thing." Misato shrugged. "I'm not sure we should say much more in front of my coworkers, though," he laughed. If people started to deny the existence of spirits, their job security would be doomed. On the other hand, it was also inaccurate to claim that something that could not be observed existed without a doubt.

"By that logic, believing in the curse means that eating adzuki beans *will* genuinely curse you. But if you believe that it's no more than a superstition, nothing will happen. Is that how you'd interpret it?"

"Yeah." Misato nodded. "But I think there's more to it. Perhaps that strange something that *makes* people think that the curse might be real is where the body of the spirit truly lies."

It was true that spirits were often seen only by those who believed in them but not by those who flat-out refuted their existence. However, if spirits were indeed no more than figments of the imagination, the Abnormal Disaster Unit wouldn't be needed. There was no denying that there was a bizarre, unexplained force that compelled humans to conceptualize spirits in the first place.

"Hmm, that's interesting... Oh, thanks." The kashiwa mochi had made its way back to Hirose just as they both finished their lunches.

"Yoshida 'n' Tsujimoto are out at the moment, but yeh might manage to get rid of a few more mochi when they get back," Ookubo predicted, returning the bag to Hirose. Only a third or so of its contents from the beginning of lunch was left.

"No, no—don't worry too much. I'll get rid of them somehow," Hirose assured him. "I can't force you to eat them, after all." He sighed, staring at the residual mochi. There weren't many sweet lovers in the Abnormal Disaster Unit.

"Actually, Hirose..." piped up Misato suddenly. "Could I take about half of those? Not for me, of course—but Ryouji will love them." Misato's sort-of landlord, Ryouji Karino, had the biggest sweet tooth of anyone he'd ever met. It wouldn't be healthy for Ryouji to have too many, but Misato thought that a few to cleanse his palate after drinking that talisman tea couldn't hurt.

"*Him* again, huh?" Hirose wrinkled his nose, and Misato replied with a strained laugh.

About one month prior, Ryouji had been at the heart of a huge scandal. At that time, Misato all but broke down in front of Hirose, revealing an ugly side of himself that he would've preferred not to have shown. Misato could only surmise that Hirose didn't have a very favorable impression of Ryouji as a result.

"Yup—him again. He hasn't been very well lately, so maybe it'll cheer him up a bit."

Hirose's expression grew more and more sour as Misato spoke. He opened his mouth to say something...but ultimately swallowed his words and simply nodded with a sigh. "...Whatever. Take as many as you like."

Misato gratefully took the bag from him and began to count out the remaining mochi.

Chapter 2: Mount Kagura

URBAN Tomoe lay in a basin where the Gouno, Basen, and Saijou Rivers intersected. It was said that a third of the annual rainfall across all of Hiroshima Prefecture ended up in Tomoe, where the current of the Gouno swept up the contents of all three rivers before carrying them through the Chugoku Mountains and into to the Sea of Japan.

Every fall, the mountains surrounding the Tomoe Basin transformed from summery green to a rusty orange-brown, bracing themselves for winter. It was a shame that they didn't boast a more colorful, elegant scene of reds and purples; their monotonous palette was most likely due to the fact that the temperature in Tomoe barely changed from day to night. Instead, the town was known for a different natural phenomenon: thick, dense seas of fog. In the early morning, mist pooled at the junction of the three rivers, gradually immersing the entire basin in an opaque, pure-white cloud.

It was through one such flood of fog, yet uncleared as of midday, that Misato Miyazawa was driving a town hall car.

On the northwest edge of the basin nestled a small village called Nagaso. The remote settlement was sandwiched between the mountains and the Saijou River where it came flowing from the north. The mountains' influence on the village ran deep: numerous folk legends centered around Mount Kagura, the peak that towered over the area to the north, and the stories had been passed from generation to generation. Most were tales of mysterious disappearances—tales of Nagaso's villagers being spirited away.

Misato was on his way to talk to a young mother who'd moved to the village a few years before, and more specifically, to discuss the strange behavior of her six-year-old son.

In truth, Misato was not at all happy to be making the house call. It was depressingly easy to foretell how unwelcome he would be. At least the older citizens, those whose families had lived in Tomoe for lifetimes, were vaguely aware of the Abnormal Disaster

Unit and the sort of work it did, but a young transplant was unlikely to believe that Tomoe Town Hall employed a cadre of occultists. Not to mention, the young mother had to be distressed about her son's sudden change in character. She would probably be nothing but suspicious of an eccentric young man claiming to be a civil servant.

"People don't usually expect a *psychic* to be assigned to their case when they go asking the district welfare officer for advice," Misato said with a sigh, his grip tightening on the steering wheel.

His route followed the national highway through the rustic scenery of Tomoe District and then made a right turn down a prefectural road just as Mount Higuma loomed up ahead. As he flicked his turn signal, he noticed a Buddhist gate at the side of the road. It was the entrance to a cemetery; gravestones lined the foot of Mount Higuma, and he could see a whole row of them from the street.

Higuma was by far the most spiritually dense mountain in Tomoe. It was on another level compared to most metaphysical hotspots—definitely not the type of place that people casually visited out of curiosity. No, a visit to Mount Higuma invited the very real possibility of getting cursed. That said, given that the adjoining Mount Kagura was the setting of numerous disappearances, it was unwise to make light of either mountain's mystical potency.

After several more minutes of driving, Misato reached the top of a shallow incline, and acres of cultivated land stretched out before him. He had officially arrived in the village of Nagaso. The Saijou river chased him to his right, while his view on the left expanded to a backdrop of fields and the steep face of Mount Kagura. Old houses dotted the very bottom of the mountain's slope, seeming to cling to its silhouette. Between the fields huddled much newer residential developments, where rows of houses sectioned off each plot of land on either side of the main road. Misato's destination was one such neighborhood. The couple that lived there hailed from Hiroshima City but had decided to move to the countryside so their young child could grow up in a healthier environment.

Naturally, in an age of severe population decline and urbanization, local municipalities were more than happy when nascent families settled in the area, but bizarre, spiritual

disturbances had been coinciding with the influx of arrivals frequently enough to become a pattern. Unlike the locals, the new residents didn't possess a tacit understanding of the region's subtleties and culture. Furthermore, village elders were less wont to enforce endemic superstitions and customs the way they might have in decades past.

Misato squeezed down one of the narrow residential streets, the car passing by the stylish walls of orderly, uniform, built-for-sale homes. He slowly cruised forward until he finally spotted the house he was looking for. He rolled to a stop just in front of their garden and pulled up the handbrake.

"All right, Misato. You can do this. Whatever they say, it doesn't matter. Okay?" he muttered, exhaling slowly as he gave himself a little pep talk.

His managers knew just as well as he that his unusual appearance might alarm the couple, but they'd chosen Misato for the job for a specific reason: the case had been labeled an emergency after the district welfare officer gave her report. The main rush of fall festivals had concluded, so most of the unit was preparing for Niiname-sai, a harvest ritual in which the Emperor of Japan addressed the Shinto deities and thanked them for a prosperous year. Misato, however, had garnered somewhat of a reputation for his ability to settle supernatural incidents on his own and with immediate results, whatever the circumstances. As such, they had entrusted the time-sensitive issue to Misato while they busied themselves with other matters.

Misato took a lot of pride in the fact that he had earned the team's trust in just over the half year he'd been working with them. *You've got this, Misato Miyazawa. Believe in yourself.*

Repeating those words to himself, he pressed the doorbell.

The European-style door of gorgeous, amber-colored wood swung open, and a thirty-something-year-old woman popped her head through the gap. Misato greeted her courteously with a polite bow of his head before pointing to the name badge affixed to the collar of his red Town Hall jacket.

"Good afternoon. My name's Misato Miyazawa, and I'm from Tomoe Town Hall's Abnormal Disaster Unit. Might you be Konomi Sugihara? I believe we spoke on the phone." With all his might, he plastered a bright, wide grin on his face.

The woman in front of him had black, slightly wavy hair

pinned in place with a barrette and was notably small in stature. Eventually she nodded, her hesitance apparent in her body language. “Um, yes... That’s me...” she said warily. Her sloping shoulders curled inward, making her seem even meeker than she already was.

“I was told that you’ve been speaking to Kojima, your district’s welfare officer, about your son, Haruto. I wondered if I might ask you a few questions about him. Is now a good time?”

The house’s interior caught Misato’s eye. The entryway was tiled, and bisque red brick interspersed the stuccoed walls. The modern entrance hall was spacious and tidy, every aspect of it fashioned with a certain European sensibility. Misato thought it strange how popular decorating one’s home as if it were a café seemed to be in recent years.

“O-Of course. Come inside,” Sugihara said, nervously showing him into the house. On the one hand, Misato was glad that she seemed to bear no hostility toward him. On the other, he couldn’t deny that he was beginning to worry that she was the type to unwittingly invite disruption into her life.

She led him into a wood-floored combined living and dining room, where the table was obviously set up to host a visitor. An adjacent short bookcase lined with colorful toys made it clear that there was a young child in the home.

“I suppose Haruto’s at school, isn’t he?” Misato asked.

“Yes,” confirmed Sugihara with a nod.

Misato nodded in return and fished a client information sheet out of his bag to double check the details of the case with her.

The Sugihara household consisted of a married couple in their midthirties and their six-year-old son. Mr. Sugihara commuted one and a half hours to his office job in Hiroshima City every day, and Mrs. Sugihara began working part-time at a nearby factory once her son started elementary school that past spring. Haruto was a first grader at Tomoe Elementary, and he rode the school bus there each day along with a few other kids who lived in the neighborhood.

Haruto’s odd behavior took the form of a sudden wanderlust: he’d developed the tendency to drift away every chance he got. After school, for example, he would take the bus home as usual but, instead of walking back to his house from the bus stop, meander down the wrong path and head into the mountains alone. Worse, even when someone went to pick him up from school directly, he

would vanish the moment they took their eyes off him.

The problem had developed only three weeks prior and was so severe that his disappearances could already be counted on two hands. Apparently, he never tried to leave while at school, but Sugihara was constantly on edge nonetheless—understandably. He'd been known to wander off at any time, so it was entirely possible he could escape during the night if she didn't have her wits about her. It sounded exhausting.

"Yes, that's about everything I told Kojima when she visited. She also asked whether Haruto had mentioned anyone calling out to him, but... Well, Haruto has never been a very talkative child, you see. So I asked him directly: 'Why do you keep going out, honey?'" explained Sugihara, hanging her head and wringing her hands in her lap.

She was clearly under a lot of stress. Her experiences over the past few weeks seemed like the beginning of a horror movie; no wonder she was a nervous wreck. Even if she refused to believe that spirits were behind Haruto's sudden change in behavior, there was no denying that it was unsettling. Furthermore, the district welfare officer—the person she had thought might make some sense of it all—had asked some ominous questions. It must have been incredibly unpleasant for her.

"And did he reply?"

Sugihara had barely made eye contact with Misato since he arrived. If Tsujimoto, Misato's mentor, were present, he would've had some kind of trick to put the client at ease. Misato felt a little guilty that his people skills were so comparatively poor, but comforting those involved was hardly the first priority when the situation was so dire.

I'll probably be here all day just trying to sort it out.

"Yes, but...he didn't say much, so I don't really know what he meant. He said...he was going out to play tag," Sugihara answered.

Tag, huh? Misato mouthed to himself. "With whom?" he prompted.

Sugihara shook her head and shrugged, her eyes tired. Her shoulders trembled slightly, shivering as though she'd just realized how chilly it was.

Misato narrowed his eyes as he took a sip of his already-lukewarm black coffee. He was familiar with the folktales surrounding Mount Kagura in which villagers were spirited away,

but none of his research had ever mentioned children's games. "Tell me, does Haruto ever come home of his own accord? Or do you have to go out looking for him?"

The information Kojima had relayed to the Abnormal Disaster Unit was minimal. All Misato had heard was that Haruto's behavior had abruptly changed and that he always beelined to Mount Kagura without fail. He knew no details.

"We have to find him ourselves every time," Sugihara said with a frown. "Fortunately—well, that might be the wrong word, but one good thing is that only a few paths lead to Mount Kagura around here. Our neighbors usually spot him before he gets too far. But..." She hesitated, and her expression clouded further. Misato waited in silence, patiently giving her time to continue. She clenched her fists in her lap so tightly that her bony knuckles turned a sickly white. "It feels like everyone knows something we don't, and...it's really, really creepy."

Presumably, those who had been living in Nagaso for generations were aware that there was something malevolent dwelling in the shadow of the mountain. He could probably find records of "abnormal disasters" as well, if he dug back far enough. The only problem was that those records were unlikely to have been digitized or organized in any coherent manner, so it would take considerable effort to find them.

"That must be really uncomfortable for you," Misato said gently, nodding. Truly, from the bottom of his heart he sympathized with her. To regular people like Sugihara and Hirose, ghosts and monsters were completely unobservable. It was natural to be scared of the unknown—of entities they could scarcely contemplate—and it was terrifying to be at its utter mercy.

Misato offered Sugihara his best attempt at a comforting smile when she cautiously lifted her head. "It's going to be okay," he assured her. "I'll gather all the information I can, then formulate a plan to tackle Haruto's problem once and for all. Many of the things my team deals with can't be physically seen or easily rationalized, so it's always tough on the people who're affected. If there's anything you're worried about, please don't hesitate to tell me."

The tension in her shoulders seemed to dissipate ever so slightly. With that to reassure him, Miasto decided to proceed with his current line of inquiry. He produced a final piece of paper from a plastic document sleeve and handed it to Sugihara, saying, "Please

take this. Sorry that it's a little crude, but these simple charms should help you—even if just to calm your nerves. Strangely, spiritual matters are often linked to a person's state of mind.”

A perplexed look crossed Sugihara's face as she cast her wholly amateur gaze over the printout.

The front detailed what to do if one ever encountered an abnormal disaster, while the back listed a long column of simple incantations for various situations. Misato showed her the page's reverse, then pointed to the section that concerned runaways and disappearances.

“When such disturbances occur, it's important that you don't write the experience off as paranoia; you have us professionals here to deal with anything unexplainable. Even so, I understand that it's hard to feel powerless in a crisis directly affecting you. When those feelings get the better of you, I really recommend reading through these charms. Hopefully it'll give you a little peace of mind. Also, you can find my contact details at the bottom of the page here, so if anything's bothering you, please just give me a call.”

Because ghostly apparitions were fueled not by physical means but by people's cognition, they were greatly influenced by the mental states of those involved. In that sense, dealing with spirits was somewhat solely a battle of willpower, but it was a bad move to suddenly start giving pep talks to people who were feeling mentally and emotionally cornered. Misato found that the best approach was to do his utmost to lighten the client's psychological burden before encouraging them to think more positively about the situation. Whether or not the problem could easily be resolved often hinged on their outlook.

Another important reason to maintain a close relationship with clients was to protect them from collateral damage—mainly from scammers pretending to be psychics. The faux fortune tellers preyed on and exploited people with genuine sensitivity to spirits, claiming that the person in question was cursed by or bound to a spirit that only *they* could exorcise—for a fee, of course.

Humans, when lost and scared, tended to cling to whatever was available as their savior, their knight in shining armor. No matter whether that “savior” was a malevolent spirit or an ill-intentioned fraudster, it was the Abnormal Disaster Unit's duty to protect their clients from such abuses. That meant providing them with small, reasonable doses of hope so they wouldn't be so keen to

give themselves over to false promises. People were stronger willed and more skeptical when they felt they had some control over their own salvation.

A lot of those ideas Misato had co-opted—or learned, rather—from his mentors and superiors. Over the course of the small unit's many decades handling spirits, they had put together a definitive manual on client care.

“...Thank you.” For the first time since Misato arrived, Sugihara looked him in the eye.

He breathed an internal sigh of relief; that was a sign she was beginning to trust him. “Of course,” Misato said with a smile, nodding again as he stood up from the table. “I’ll need to speak with Kojima about the case, so I’ll be gone for a little while. We’ll contact you again for a visit once Haruto gets home from school, but if anything happens in the meantime, you have my number.” He bowed politely before moving toward the door.

“All right,” Sugihara said, inclining her head slightly in return. She held the printout tightly between her fingers.

With one last smile, Misato let himself out the front door, then climbed back into the government car.

HE made a short trip back to Town Hall to eat lunch, after which he wasted no time in contacting Kojima, the district welfare officer. Kojima was a woman in her midsixties charged with ensuring that elementary students were able to commute to and from school safely and independently. The lower grades finished at half past two at the earliest, so he thought it would be a good idea to talk to Kojima before the after-school rush. If possible, Misato wanted to observe Haruto just as he got out of school, too.

Kojima's house faced Tomoe Elementary School, the two buildings on opposite sides of an old prefectural road. In a time long past, her house had functioned as a shop, and a bench squatted on the lowered dirt floor of what had once been the storefront. It was the perfect place for Kojima to watch over the kids, and hence she sat there every day to see that they left school safely.

“Hi, Mrs. Kojima!” A little girl sporting a pastel-colored backpack came running into the room. In addition to the warm

space heater in the middle, there were also several tables and chairs scattered about, all crowded with children chatting animatedly with their friends or silently doing homework. The walls were lined with kids' drawings—some new and others clearly decades old.

“Good afternoon, Yuuko!” Kojima grinned as she greeted the little girl in turn. The time was just coming up on three o'clock, and the lower grades were pouring out of the school building in droves.

The pigtailed girl, Yuuko, leveled a long, hard stare at Misato where he sat next to Kojima on the bench. Misato was used to that look; she was probably trying to figure out whether he was a man or woman. Despite his long hair and elegant features, he wasn't usually assumed to be a woman outright, although it was a common occurrence for people to struggle to determine his gender. Furthermore, his first name could work for either gender, so introducing himself didn't usually do anything to help the situation.

“Good afternoon,” Misato said, following Kojima's example. Yuuko jumped, spooked, and hastily mumbled a reply before running toward the back of the room.

“I s'pose she was fascinated to see such a beautiful young man as yourself,” chuckled Kojima.

“Mm,” responded Misato half-heartedly, sighing to himself. Personally, he didn't think he was outstandingly feminine or beautiful; he viewed himself as “mediocre looking with a stereotypically Japanese face.” In fact, he had no memories of anyone ever commenting on his appearance back when his hair was still short. It wasn't that he was especially feminine—he just lacked any particularly masculine qualities.

“Now, hold on a second, Yuuko! Would you come here and talk to me for a few minutes, sweetheart?” Kojima called again, beckoning the girl back over. Apparently, Yuuko was in third grade, and her house was only a few doors down the street. She and Kojima were close neighbors. “Tell me, sweetie—do you know that story about playing tag in the mountains?” asked Kojima. She was referring to a ghost story that was popular among the Tomoe Elementary students. For some reason, the children were the only ones gossiping about and discussing the potential origins of Haruto's strange behavior.

“Oh, umm... N-Nope,” Yuuko stammered. For a moment, she had obviously moved to nod, but she quickly replaced the gesture with a shake of her head.

Kojima peered searchingly into the girl's uneasy eyes. "What's wrong?" she asked, prompting Yuuko to tell the truth.

"My teacher said it's not good to gossip 'bout stuff that might not be true..." Yuuko explained. The ghost story was evidently quite the hot topic, and it appeared that the teacher had opted to ban talk of the tale altogether before rumors led to bullying or any sort of danger.

"Well, we've got a nice man from the town hall here to find out whether it's true or not. You should tell him whatcha know. Don't worry—I won't tell anyone you said a thing. Okay?"

It was clear that the children genuinely trusted their beloved "Mrs. Kojima"; it wasn't long until Yuuko nodded nervously in agreement and began to speak.

Kids—especially first-graders—weren't allowed to play tag in the mountains. Plus, if they ever heard a voice asking, "Are you ready?" while there, the worst thing to do was to reply with "Ready!" If they heard that voice, they had to respond with "Not yet!"

So went the ghost story that pupils of Tomoe Elementary School continued to spread. And in spite of the many changes in cohort, the tale was already making the rounds way back when Kojima first started keeping an eye on the schoolkids.

Actually, Kojima had attended Tomoe Elementary herself, but she had no recollection of coming across the story then, which meant that it must have arisen through the influence of some book or TV show in the meantime. Or perhaps another group of students brought it with them when the elementary schools in Tomoe were reshuffled and consolidated. Heard in isolation, the rumor could simply be interpreted as a cautionary tale to deter young children from playing in dangerous areas.

"So...did Haruto go to play tag there?" Kojima asked.

"Umm... Probably." Yuuko shrugged.

A young boy sitting at one of the tables, however, immediately piped up. "No, he didn't!" he called out. And with that, the floodgates opened. All of the children erupted into conversation, desperate to contribute to the discussion. They must've been itching to say something the whole time.

"It's 'cause he said, 'Ready!' So now the demon's calling out to him!"

"But Take said he answered, 'Not yet!'"

“Well, if he was playin’ tag at all, he’s done for no matter what he said!”

“Who’d he play it with, then?”

Misato laughed awkwardly as the room filled with the clamor of shouting children.

Sugihara had come to the school to pick up Haruto directly, and they would already have gone home by that point. After initially talking to Kojima about the case that afternoon, Misato had decided to rearrange his schedule in order to hear what the other students had to say before questioning Haruto himself. He’d waited at the school gates to let Sugihara know about the change of plan, then made his way back to Kojima’s home.

Right. We still don’t know what prompted this spirit to start targeting Haruto in the first place.

Haruto had told Kojima that he was playing tag with someone in the mountains, but whenever she asked with *whom* he was playing, all he did was shake his head. She was of the opinion that he wasn’t really sure who was calling to him or why he felt the need to go there.

“Hey—does anyone know why Haruto was asked to play tag in the first place?” Misato called out, raising his hand slightly to draw attention to himself.

The children exchanged furtive glances before turning to whisper among themselves. Their joyful mood from a few seconds prior was gone; it seemed the question had broached some kind of taboo.

A small voice broke through the hushed mumblings. “Cause Haruto’s a *Nagasan*, he’s not allowed to eat adzuki beans.”

The room fell deathly silent. Judging by how the child uttered “Nagasan” with distaste, it was clear that the term’s purpose was to differentiate and possibly ostracize the Nagaso villagers from others who lived in Tomoe. The displeased, surreptitious tone was something the kids had probably adopted from the adults around them. Instinctively, Misato shifted his gaze toward Kojima. Though, if the look of surprise and confusion on her face was anything to go by, she’d never heard the word before.

“What do adzuki beans have to do with this?” Misato asked.

Their voices anxious and fearful, the children muttered explanations one after another.

“Yuu’s a Nagasan, an’ the other day, he said he’s not allowed

to eat mochi...”

“Yeah. He said the villagers get cursed if they eat any...”

“I guess Saki’s family threw out all the mochi she brought home for them...”

The whole thing sounded strangely familiar to Misato. He rubbed at his temples, chasing after the sense of déjà vu as he committed each child’s out-of-context anecdotes to memory.

“And did Haruto eat the mochi?” asked Kojima, since Misato was absorbed in deep contemplation. When several of the kids nodded in confirmation, she continued, “So, if someone from Nagaso eats adzuki beans and gets cursed, does that mean they get invited to play tag?”

It was undoubtedly strange for a “curse” to manifest as a children’s game. Compulsive rounds of paranormal tag and an adzuki-bean-based spiritual affliction sounded like two different folktales entirely. Unfortunately, wrangling a detailed answer out of the kids as for why the two legends had become entwined seemed a futile task.

“Thank you very much for your time, Kojima.” Misato smiled. “I think it’ll be more efficient if I investigate the stuff about the adzuki beans on my own, so I’ll let you guys get back to playing now. Thanks, everyone.”

Local taboos existed throughout Japan and acted as the binding threads of small communities. For the most part, such folklore was based around a regional deity, and it was the local shrine parishioners’ duty to make sure those prohibitions were respected. There were two shrines in Nagaso: Nagaso Yasaka Shrine and Kagura Shrine, the latter of which perched at the summit of Mount Kagura. If Misato centered his research around those two locations, he was sure to find some kind of lead about the adzuki bean curse.

Misato bowed his head to Kojima, then turned to wave to the children before exiting the house. The northern wind that greeted him outside instigated a full-body shiver. He looked to the sky, gazing up through the leafless persimmon trees, their fruits bright red and overripe.

“Oh, right! I remember: Hirose was the one who told me that story. Maybe his mom comes from Tomoe?” he realized aloud. His former classmate had brought up an extremely similar folktale only a few days before. First on his to-do list was to call the head office

—if he was lucky, the phone operator could route him through to speak with Hirose.

With that plan in mind, Misato jumped into the town hall car. Even if he had to push himself and clock overtime, he really wanted to get the emergency under control before the day was over. He had no time to waste. He would leave the information gathering to someone back at the office and aim to visit the Sugihara household once more before sundown.

“MY mom’s childhood home? Oh, yeah—that’s right. It’s definitely somewhere around there. Her maiden name’s Tagami. Y’know that drink company warehouse on the national highway? There’s another road that branches off there toward the mountains. Her old house is just on the left-hand side. Mm-hmm, my grandparents still live there. Yeah, they know I’m working at Town Hall... Yeah. I’ll let them know you’re on your way. Hey—don’t worry about it. They’ll know what you’re talking about for sure. I know for a fact they refuse to eat adzuki beans because of that curse, so they’ll be able to tell you all kinds of stuff.”

And so, with Hirose’s kindhearted assistance, Misato first swung by the Tagami household. He had no idea how Hirose had introduced him to them, but the man must’ve talked him up quite a bit; he was baffled by the couple’s overwhelmingly positive reception and hospitality upon his arrival. He found himself a little dazed as he asked for their input.

As Sugihara suspected, all of the other villagers were very aware of what was going on with Haruto. The fact that no one had tried to alert the Abnormal Disaster Unit despite their knowledge of the situation merely underscored how difficult it was for old and new residents to connect over spiritual matters. That wasn’t to say the former had ill intentions, however. It was an extremely daunting prospect to intrude into a stranger’s life with no guarantee that simply trying to help wouldn’t result in being attacked or laughed at.

After confirming his suspicions with the Tagamis, Misato returned straight to the Sugiharas’. By that time, it was just past five o’clock. He and Sugihara were sitting opposite one another in the

living room, the scenery outside the window already steeped in darkness following the early sunset.

“Haruto’s birthday was in March, wasn’t it? So he’s six years old—making him seven if we go by the traditional system,” Misato calculated.

In present-day Japan, the old East Asian method of reckoning age was pretty much obsolete. Sugihara nodded uncertainly, her expression tinted with confusion. Haruto was settled on the carpet just behind her, engrossed in watching some video on a tablet.

“I can only ask that you keep an open mind for what I’m about to say,” Misato continued. “I hear that adzuki beans have been regarded as a food of the gods here in Nagaso for a long, long time; that’s why the villagers won’t eat them, although they’re still grown on farms in the area. A few weeks ago, I believe Haruto and his classmates made some mochi using adzuki beans that they grew and picked themselves. This is only significant because of a folktale I’ve heard: if a child of Nagaso eats adzuki beans at any point through the age of seven, they’ll be summoned to Mount Kagura. As the kids tell it, they’ll find themselves being challenged to a game of tag by...*something*. Then, once they make their way to the mountain, a voice will call out, asking, ‘Are you ready?’ The story goes that if they reply with ‘Ready,’ that *something* will take them away. So, basically— ...Oh, Sugihara, are you okay?” Panicked, Misato stopped talking, peering at Sugihara. Her head hung limply, and her face was a deathly pale color.

The significance of being seven was a tidbit that Misato had only just learned. The Tagamis claimed that back in their day, the tale revolved around seven-year-olds. At some point, however, it had apparently changed to refer to first graders.

“Yes... I’m fine...”

To encounter ghost stories on TV or in a book was one thing, but a paranormal event was utterly core shaking when it happened to someone in real life. Misato regretted how Sugihara must have felt but had to finish his explanation nevertheless.

“All things considered, I think we can definitely say that Haruto is being called to Mount Kagura. Fortunately, he’s been safe thus far, and I’d say that’s because he’s already familiar with the story. Instead of replying with ‘Ready,’ he’s been saying, ‘Not yet,’ just as he’s supposed to.” Misato had checked with Haruto himself a few minutes beforehand. It had taken a while for the boy to talk,

but sure enough, the folktale had already been instilled in him.

“If we could just make it through the rest of this year, then, come New Year’s Day, Haruto will be eight years old by the traditional count, and the spirit in the mountains will stop bothering him,” Misato predicted. “However, that’s still two whole months away, and it’s too dangerous to leave things as they are. In the meantime, I’ll leave you with some protection.”

Even if Haruto wasn’t in danger of being taken, it was still risky for a six-year-old to wander around against his own will. There was no telling what sort of trouble he might possibly stumble into, thus they couldn’t rest easy.

When Sugihara heard the conviction with which Misato said “protection,” she raised her head. She stared at him with desperate, pleading eyes, as if he represented her last shred of hope.

Luckily, Misato had already received approval for his plan from Yoshida. He produced a folded envelope from his breast pocket, opening it to reveal some thin strips of Japanese paper and a small doll made from the same material. He fished a calligraphy pen out of his pocket and handed one of the strips to Sugihara.

“Okay—I’d like to ask you to rub this paper three times each on four locations on Haruto’s body: his head, both of his shoulders, then his stomach. Could you do that? If he won’t let you, then even just his head will do,” Misato said with a nod.

Sugihara gingerly took the paper between her fingertips before calling Haruto over. Fortunately, Haruto was of a very calm, well-behaved temperament, and he allowed his mother to press the paper to his skin without any fuss.

That’s the first hurdle over and done with, Misato thought to himself as he fiddled with the doll in the palm of his hand. He’d made it by twisting strands of his own hair with paper cord, then setting the fibers with paste. By molding the doll in such a way, he was able to utilize the secret Narukami ritual to create *shikigami*—conjured beings who could carry out various tasks at the caster’s will.

The peculiar art was unique to the direct descendants of the Narukami bloodline. At a glance, neither the doll nor the tools required to fashion it were particularly complex, but spiritual servants who could act autonomously with no harm to the conjuror were extremely rare as well as incredibly useful. That was why Misato kept his hair long: so he had plenty of resources to perform

the ritual whenever needed.

Sugihara returned, and Misato took the paper back. He placed it on the coffee table and pulled the cap off the calligraphy pen with a *pop*. “Could you just confirm Haruto’s name and date of birth for me?” he asked again, just in case. Sugihara nodded, and Misato proceeded to write Haruto’s information on the slip of paper as she relayed it to him. He had prepared the ink inside the pen as well as the paper himself and carried both specifically for use in rituals.

He swiped the brush across the paper expertly. After waiting for the ink to dry, he folded the strip tight, then tied it to the doll’s torso. “Now the spirit will play tag with this doll instead of Haruto,” he explained. “The doll acts as a substitute, and no harm will come to Haruto no matter what happens to it. And don’t worry, if the doll gets destroyed somehow, I’ll sense it happening. I’ll take it to Mount Kagura myself, so all you need to do is keep an eye on Haruto and make sure he’s his normal self. I doubt the spirit will start calling out to him again, but it’s a good idea to watch him carefully until the year’s out—just in case. In the unlikely event that anything *does* happen, call me as soon as possible.” He slid the doll back into its envelope and tucked it back into his breast pocket.

Sugihara turned her head slightly to glance at Haruto before nodding hesitantly. She bowed her head to Misato and said, “Thank you very much... If this whole thing really does stop, I’ll be so grateful...” From a logical point of view, Misato’s solution certainly seemed sketchy. But Sugihara was desperate; she locked her fingers together as though she were praying.

“Do you mind if I call you a few times tomorrow? Just to check if everything’s going all right?” asked Misato gently. He wanted to monitor their situation over the coming days.

“Please do,” Sugihara said, inclining her head again.

Thereafter, Misato headed to the foot of Mount Kagura.

From that night onward, Haruto’s bizarre case of wanderlust suddenly vanished. As for the initial cause, whether it was the adzuki beans that had “cursed” him or not, the Abnormal Disaster Unit would have to investigate further. Regardless, the Sugiharas had been successfully saved, and it seemed like all the unit needed was a little time to close out the case completely.

That sense of peaceful quiet lasted for a month. What Misato didn’t know was that the lull was no more than the calm before a ruthless, overwhelming storm.

Chapter 3: Misato Narukami

KATSUKI Narukami was in his third year of high school. Winter vacation was approaching, and his classmates were readying for their final exams in a wolfish frenzy.

Katsuki loathed the season. The madness wasn't confined to his school life either; back at home, his family was in a constant flurry as they prepared New Year's rituals and the religious services to take place at the end of the month. As the successor to the Narukamis, Katsuki had to partake in all sorts of tiresome ceremonies and formalities.

And he couldn't use the upcoming exams as an excuse. His father was the head of the most spiritually powerful and influential family in all of Japan; Katsuki's educational path was effectively predetermined. He'd merely had to attend a single, laidback interview in mid-October, and his university education was set in stone. Not that anyone had ever asked him whether that was what he truly wanted, of course.

Naturally, the exhaustion and feelings of alienation that weighed on him were unwelcome, but his memories were what really sent him into an annual depression. Accompanying the changing season and bare tree branches was anger, frustration, and a profound sense of loss.

He stood on a beach close to his home, glaring at the horizon as raging winds off the Sea of Japan uncaringly assaulted him. He'd been ordered to grow out his hair so it would be long enough by the time he graduated from high school. Its loose waves kept getting in his face, which he couldn't stand. "I'm a guy, I don't even want to grow it," he grumbled, "and the fact that it won't stay put makes it ten times worse." He combed his fingers through his bangs, pushing them back. His hair was more dark brown than black, and its curls twisted and frizzed the longer it grew. Katsuki wasn't like his father or his half brother—their hair was jet black, straight, and silky, and the length looked good on them regardless of gender.

Katsuki's half brother was five years older and was born before

their father married Katsuki's mother. Their father had met his brother's mother while living away from Izumo and working at a regular company. At the time, their father hadn't planned to succeed the family head. But then things changed, and he married the woman who would become Katsuki's mother. It was purely a union of convenience, and thus the distance between the couple was palpable. Although Katsuki had always lived under the same roof as his parents, he couldn't recall a time where either of them had been present in his life. He most certainly didn't grow up surrounded by love and support.

Because it was finals season, the school day had ended at lunchtime. He was supposed to go home, eat, and then start on the studies that would prime him to become the next head of the Narukami family... He didn't. Instead, he headed away from home and toward the coast, still wearing his school blazer as he ambled across the rocky seashore. There wasn't a single soul in sight; after all, the beach was part of the Narukamis' immense private property.

The sky pressed low, filled with dense, wintry clouds. Though midday, it was dull and gloomy. More than half of December suffered a miserable, ceaseless drizzle of rain. White crests adorned the waves as they were whipped high into the air by the forceful winds only to come tumbling down onto the strand. Flowers of seafoam lay ashore—commonly seen near the Sea of Japan in winter.

The Narukami residence was isolated from the city of Izumo, and it took about thirty minutes to drive to and from school. The chauffeur who had dropped Katsuki off at the estate gardens had most likely already informed the family of his return home. He could anticipate the scolding his tutor would give him once he eventually entered the house. But with his family's eyes constantly on him whenever he wasn't at school, such detours were the only chance he had to escape it all.

"Misato..." he whispered, forlorn.

Katsuki relied on his older brother more than anyone else in the world. Misato was gentle, kind, and always willing to lend an ear to Katsuki. Misato understood him, patient even when faced with the unruliness of a young child, and gave him whatever he needed or asked for. In Katsuki's mind, Misato was his protector, whom he loved more than he did anyone.

And it had been five years since Misato vanished from the

Narukami family without a trace.

Not only was Misato himself gone, but also no one in the household even dared to speak his name. It was as if he were dead—no, as if he had never existed at all. That was how they treated Katsuki's beloved brother, Misato Narukami.

But Katsuki knew. Katsuki knew that Misato was still out there somewhere, even if "Narukami" had been forcibly removed from his name. Katsuki suspected that their father knew how to reach Misato but would never tell him.

Then I have no choice but to seek him myself. He would not budge on that decision. He had resolved to track his brother down, no matter where Misato was. He would reclaim all of those lost, precious days they'd spent together.

A shiver coursed down his spine. A walk along the beach in the middle of December sans coat was certainly harsh on the body. He fished an old postcard out of his blazer pocket with careful fingers, its corners slightly bent and frayed. The front depicted a sunrise from the view of the International Space Station, while the back was inscribed with a short sentence in ink. It read "Dear Katsuki—I'll bring you back some space food as a souvenir," and was signed with the sender's name.

Misato Narukami.

He'd mailed it to Katsuki while on a high school trip to Tanegashima Space Center. He'd already moved out of the house at that point, and Katsuki was only ever able to see him on the rare occasion that he visited home during lengthy school breaks. Katsuki loved space, so Misato had made sure to send the card with Tanegashima Space Center's special postmark.

Katsuki traced his fingertips along the inked letters, feeling where the ballpoint pen had indented the postcard. In truth, Misato had already adopted the name "Miyazawa" by then, but...Katsuki had always believed they would be together. Not once had he ever doubted that Misato would be at his side, offering him that kind, warm smile whenever he needed it.

That is, until his first year of middle school. In late winter, Misato left the house, expressionless and deathly pale, carrying nothing but an overnight bag—and he hadn't so much as *looked* at Katsuki.

KATSUKI hopped on a local bus—the kind that came no more than once an hour. He had with him a wallet containing a few thousand-yen notes and a single credit card. Normally he had no use for cash unless it was to buy something from the school store. He'd only taken the bus once before in his life, and he remembered the event as if it had happened just the day prior. Luckily, that meant he also perfectly recalled how to go about it.

The first time, Misato went with him.

“Let’s go watch the meteor shower together,” Misato had said, taking Katsuki’s hand and leading him out of the house on a hot summer’s day. After sneaking off of the estate, they boarded a bus that followed the very same route Katsuki was taking currently. The last bus departed at around seven in the evening, so there was no way for two children to return home by themselves by the time a meteor shower ended. Misato was in middle school back then and certainly old enough to be aware of that fact, but it was only after Katsuki started fretting that he suggested they catch a bus into central Izumo.

Obviously, the Narukami household was in utter uproar when they arrived home, and both Misato and Katsuki were severely reprimanded—mostly because it would be a disaster for the family if its next head disappeared. Katsuki was sure they would react just as frantically this time around, too.

If they wanna get all heated and hysterical, that’s their problem. Isn’t there any future for me other than being forced to succeed my father?

He didn’t fear being scolded anymore. The one person whose approval he craved was no longer there.

He disembarked at the penultimate stop. He knew there was a mountain nearby, and he set off toward it, letting the flow of energy within his body guide him. The scenery immediately dimmed when he ventured into the brush. There were only about two weeks until winter solstice, and the light of the sun wasn’t at all intense. He was searching for locations where the space felt distorted in some way. The more thorough the distortion, the better. There were many spots in the vicinity of Izumo Grand Shrine that pooled with warped energy, especially those that had never been touched by human interference.

Once he found a spot to his liking, Katsuki powered off his smartphone and chucked it into the long grass. Charms and curses

couldn't be seen with the human eye; the spiritual world naturally repelled any form of observation, measurement, or record. As such, they were incompatible with phones—devices that were always connected, always seeking audio or visual input.

He gingerly slipped the postcard out of his pocket and touched his finger to the name signed at the bottom. With a slow, deep breath, he let his eyes flutter closed.

Take me to my brother. Pursue the rope of malicious spirit that binds him.

Misato... I'm not a child anymore. This time I won't just stand by and cry for you to come find me. I'll find a way to reach you—I promise.

It was about time Katsuki put an end to their diabolic game of hide-and-seek.

MISATO and Hirose stood in front of the bar entrance, eyeing the banner that proclaimed “We serve hot pot!”

“They even do hot pot here, huh?” commented Hirose. “Isn’t your friend in charge of grilling stuff on the *teppan*? He’s gonna lose his job if people keep ordering hot pot.”

“Nah.” Misato shrugged. “Say there are ten people in the place—there’s no way *all* of them will get hot pot.”

That Friday after work, the two had agreed to go for a drink at the bar where Ryouji was employed. It usually took Misato twenty minutes to drive home, and since they were going to be drinking, Hirose had graciously proposed that Misato stay the night at the apartment he was renting in central Tomoe. Holiday party season would soon be upon them, so signs advertising special courses for group reservations speckled the street alongside Christmas decorations.

“How about we share a hot pot, too? Ryouji said he’d keep a couple of seats in front of the *teppan* free for us, and I’m guessing there are no rules against eating hot pot at the bar,” Misato suggested.

Earlier, during lunch, they decided somewhat impulsively to get drinks that evening; they didn’t consider the time of year and that nearly every bar or restaurant was already fully booked. As a

result, they'd ended up at Ryouji's bar out of convenience. Hirose seemed unimpressed, but Misato saw it as a good chance to properly introduce Hirose to his eccentric housemate.

Misato pushed the door open, and a blast of hot air welcomed them into the small pub. Hirose's gaze lingered on the huge lucky cat in the entryway, and he frowned slightly.

"Hey, Miyazawa... There's something about that lucky cat," he said. The statuette had been stationed in the storefront only a few days prior. Both of its paws extended into the air, and its mouth was clamped around a charm that read "roaring business."

"Its face is kinda weird," Hirose remarked in disdain.

Misato was surprised by how perceptive Hirose was. Perhaps he couldn't visually detect spiritual phenomena, but he was certainly able to distance himself from the entities he subconsciously registered as malicious.

"Oh, *that*," Misato said with a wry smile. In its current state, the lucky cat was no more than the carcass of the spirit that had once inhabited it. The snake spirit bound to Misato had spat out the figurine after digesting its ghostly contents. "It's a long story..." he said, saving the tale for another time as they wound their way to the back of the room. Misato was thoroughly familiar with the space at that point, and the staff casually greeted him with smiles on their faces.

"Hey," one said. "Ryou's been waiting for ya."

On cue, Ryouji called out to them. "Yo. Nice to see ya both." He was standing behind the teppan at the far end of the bar, waving a nonchalant hand at them.

"Hi there," replied Misato with a wave of his own. He beckoned Hirose over. "Hirose—this is my housemate and landlord, Ryouji Karino. He works here part-time, but his main profession is as a freelance psychic."

"Pleased to meetcha." Ryouji grinned. "Those mochi from the other day were delicious, by the way. Cheers for that." A black bandana embroidered with the bar's logo covered his bleached hair, and he sported a matching black apron. Although the uniform rather dampened his bright, loud choices in hairstyle and clothing, the silver piercings that adorned his ears and the slightly tinted sunglasses that perched on his nose were ever present. Fortunately for him, a uniform could never thwart the sketchy aura he exuded.

Ryouji had missed ten days of work while he recuperated from

his spirit attack. He'd griped about losing money but, most importantly, hadn't been fired for his long absence. Apparently, his manager had acknowledged how sickly Ryouji looked and given him a long-winded lecture about proper work-life balance and the importance of a healthy diet.

That's what he gets for not taking enough precautions.

Hirose let an awkward pause lapse before stiffly stating, "Hi. I'm Hirose." He glanced at Misato with a wooden expression. He was uncomfortable—and as on the day he and Misato met again as colleagues, it *showed*. Painfully so. Misato couldn't help but wonder whether Hirose would ever come under fire for that trait should he ever have to deal with the public in view of his supervisors.

It seemed that Ryouji was used to being treated coldly, however, because he offered Hirose a seat without even flinching. Misato and Hirose both settled at the bar as directed, and Ryouji presented them with the drink menu. "Y'know, I've had a whole lotta time on my hands. Everyone's orderin' hot pot because of how damn cold it is this week," Ryouji complained with a sigh.

Misato looked at the teppan. Sure enough, hardly any grilled dishes were in progress. Usually Ryouji was so inundated with orders that he couldn't spare a second without his spatula. "I never thought I'd see the day," chuckled Misato in disbelief, gesturing at the empty griddle.

"I'll have a beer, thanks," Hirose said, raising his hand slightly.

"One for me too, please," Misato echoed.

Ryouji worked quickly; in seconds, he produced two foamy mugs of beer. Misato and Hirose clinked their glasses together with a "Cheers!" and then turned their attention to the main menu.

"Feelin' kinda jealous right now," Ryouji grumbled. "I want a beer, too."

"Nuh-uh—you're working, remember?" Misato said with an outstretched finger. As though to prove his point, he ordered some sides, thus requiring Ryouji to refocus on the teppan. In the meantime, he and Hirose bellyached about work, though they were careful to be wary of their surroundings—it would be no laughing matter if the manager they were bad-mouthing was sitting right behind them. Town Hall was only one street away, after all. Many of its employees were the bar's loyal customers.

"By the way, Miyazawa—what happened with that adzuki bean mystery in the end? I visited my grandparents in Nagaso the

other day, and my grandma was still pretty worried,” Hirose said, nibbling at his boneless ribs.

The meat was Kiriri pork, a local brand produced only in Tomoe. It was top quality, each piece crowned with a thin strip of marbling. The brand name, Kiriri, reflected the climate particular to Tomoe; *kiri* meant “mist” or “fog.” The pork was both tender and flavorful but not too fatty.

Oh, to be able to afford something so high-end... This guy's basically rich. Their base salaries were supposedly the same, but evidently, when someone was on good terms with their family, it allowed them more freedom with money. For example, in Hirose's case, because he was related to rice farmers, he didn't have to pay for rice.

“Yoink,” Misato declared as he took a small slice of pork from Hirose's plate. “At the moment, everything's fine. If Haruto's family can just make it through the rest of the year with the temporary measures in place, I think we can say the kid's safe. Still, I never thought I'd have to deal with a real-life case of the story just a week after you told it to me...”

“Right? That seriously spooked me, too,” Hirose said with a shiver. “The world's a strange place.”

As expected, Misato had managed to find records of the folktale back at the office in the week since, yet thanks to the townspeople's cooperation, he'd deciphered the legend and formed a plan of action within a single day.

“So, like, what was the origin of that folktale in the end? Did it start in Kagura Shrine? Or Yasaka Shrine?” Ryouji asked, butting in. While bedridden he'd had nothing to do but drink talisman tea, eat mochi, and listen to Misato's job concerns, so he knew pretty much the whole story.

The adzuki bean taboo had originated at Nagaso Yasaka Shrine. All of the villagers of Nagaso were under the protection of Yasaka Shrine, and they had a long tradition of offering adzuki beans up to the gods—the beans were not intended for human consumption. But the tale of children being unwillingly summoned to the mountains was very much native to Mount Kagura.

“Well... Firstly, it has something to do with the location of both the shrines. Nagaso lies along the northern face of Mount Kagura, and Kagura Shrine stands just above the village. Meanwhile, Yasaka Shrine is situated at the foot of Mount Kagura,”

Misato explained. "I struggled with how little information there is about Kagura Shrine in the accounts we have, but apparently, it houses a god that's been worshipped by the local people for a pretty long time."

The history of the inhabitants of Tomoe Basin went back centuries. Archaeological excavation in the region had revealed evidence of human life that dated to the Paleolithic Age, and a wealth of historic sites characterized the area. On sacred land on Mount Higuma, archaeologists even found indication of the existence of a shrine at its summit during the Yayoi period more than two thousand years before. Such discoveries demonstrated how the people of Tomoe had relied on the mountains as places of worship since ancient times. Those who lived at their foot viewed them as a blessing that provided water for farming as well as all sorts of other daily necessities. Concurrently, mountains were also known to be where the spirits of the dead journeyed to the Other Side.

"Also, there's something kind of...strange about Yasaka Shrine. To be honest, I'm not sure it's the kind of thing I should mention while we're eating," he said with a dry laugh, trying to gloss over the matter. But Ryouji and Hirose simply shrugged and leaned in closer to hear him better. It seemed his attempt to dissuade them had only fanned the flames of their curiosity. "Ugh, fine," Misato conceded with a grimace. "I won't go into detail, but...as for how the adzuki bean thing started... Apparently, a girl in town was killed, and she ended up enshrined as a local deity. There was a nasty famine in the area at the time, and in the generations since, the villagers of Nagaso have grown adzuki beans to offer up at Yasaka Shrine to appease the girl's spirit. And despite the large number of beans at their disposal, the villagers never so much as nibbled on them."

In Haruto's case, it was little more than an unfortunate accident that led to his curse: Nagaso-grown adzuki beans were being used in a program introduced to elementary schools called "Our Local Crops." It focused on making use of what traditionally grew in each region of Japan rather than importing produce from other locations. Many organizations across the country had been advocating for indigenous foodstuffs and its benefits in recent years.

Naturally, the villagers of Nagaso that had lived there for generations would never have furnished the program with adzuki

beans when asked, but the problem lay in the fact that some residents had moved to the area only recently. The farmer who supplied Tomoe Elementary School with Nagaso-grown adzuki beans was among them—he had escaped a life of office work in the city to become a full-time farmer instead. Of course, Misato would never argue that it was bad for newcomers to acquaint citizens with local produce, but...given what had happened as a result, he couldn't help but judge the man as somewhat thoughtless. That he'd handed over adzuki beans without consulting any of the other farmers had caused a huge headache for the Abnormal Disaster Unit, at any rate.

Furthermore, the school refused to deal with the matter once alerted, which made it incredibly difficult for Misato to develop countermeasures to prevent the incident from repeating. Indeed, the school board had chosen not to acknowledge the possibility of supernatural interference. The spirit itself wasn't the only thing Misato and his colleagues were up against.

To an extent, their recalcitrance was understandable. From the school's point of view, it was absurd to cater to superstition rather than encourage citizens to sample local food.

"The ADU already has a pretty poor relationship with the Board of Education, to be honest..." sighed Misato, his head drooping. He'd already downed two pints of beer and three whiskey highballs. "The schoolteachers have different interests at heart, too...which makes it hard to have a serious discussion with them..."

Solving cases with flimsy, patchwork measures wasn't what the Abnormal Disaster Unit *did*. In fact, its entire ethos revolved around disaster prevention and mitigation, so of course they were doing everything in their power to forestall a recurrence—but as of yet, they still didn't have the cooperation of the most important party.

"Nah. I think you're screwed on that one, dude," Ryouji said with a resigned exhale. "Schools are all about being objective and science-y 'n' all that. You're not gonna change their minds."

"Huh. Welp—that makes that teacher I had when I was a kid seem even weirder," Hirose remarked.

Hirose and Ryouji both threw in their nonchalant two cents on the topic, despite it not being their problem.

While the Abnormal Disaster Unit and the Board of Education had never been on the best of terms, both the current principal and

vice principal of Tomoe Elementary School were the types who spurned the mere idea of listening to whatever government-appointed exorcists had to say.

“Ugh. I wish we could work with the Engineering and Construction Division every time... At least *they* understand,” Misato grouched.

Those involved in Tomoe’s construction industry were rather superstitious themselves when it came to purifying sites in preparation for new buildings. The Engineering and Construction Division was the most willing out of every department at Town Hall to accommodate spiritual concerns. Even the private construction companies in town were well aware of the Abnormal Disaster Unit’s work and consequently always treated Misato and his colleagues with respect.

“But...” interjected Ryouji, furrowing his brow in confusion, “didn’t you go crazy the other day ’cause they chopped down some sacred tree without asking in order to build a bypass?”

“No, no, that was the prefectural government.”

“Damn. You’re up against some really tough opponents in your department. That’s gotta be tough,” Hirose murmured in genuine sympathy. For some reason, the sentiment caused Misato’s eyes to well up with tears. He might have a strange job by societal standards, but the flak he faced at work was no different from that of any other office worker.

“Bewaaaaare, Takayuki Hirose...” howled Misato, imitating some kind of ghostly phantom. “If you linger too long at our cursed office, an *eeevil* department reshuffle will have you reassigned to our division in three years’ time...”

Hirose responded with a scream that sounded like a frog being trod on, while Ryouji sniggered heartily at the both of them.

Half of the unit was stationed in the office permanently, including specialists like Misato. The other half was made up of general administrative staff who had been trained to work in any department. Each employee’s strengths and opinions were considered to a certain extent, which meant that those who harbored no discomfort with the Abnormal Disaster Unit had a relatively high chance of ending up there.

Misato decided to order a glass of *shouchuu* on the rocks—along with some aromatic, stir-fried cabbage to accompany the Japanese liquor.

“Miyazawa... Are you all right, bro?” Hirose asked, eyeing him doubtfully.

“Don’t worry ’bout him; he’ll be fine,” Ryouji said with a flippant shrug. “If anything, Misato can handle his alcohol.” He’d witnessed it for himself plenty of times.

Misato drank in moderation whenever he went out with colleagues, but in truth, he had a pretty high tolerance. Ryouji was similarly accustomed to drinking in large amounts, so they still hadn’t settled the matter of which of them could hold their liquor best. When Misato mentioned their little competition at work, one of his coworkers had noted, “Between a huge serpent and a tengu, it’s no wonder alcohol does nothing to either of yeh!”

“Fine. Just don’t puke back at my place, okay?” groaned Hirose. “Anyway... That story about the adzuki beans is pretty different from the one I know. What about the yokai? The azukiarai?”

In Hirose’s tale, the curse resulted from eating adzuki beans that had been left out for an azukiarai. Unsurprisingly, Misato had heard the same version from Hirose’s grandparents, the Tagamis.

“Hmmm... The azukiarai was probably added to the story sometime later. As yokai go, azukiarai haven’t actually been around for very long, after all,” Misato concluded.

When stories were passed down in an oral tradition, it was only natural that the particulars changed slightly with each generation. It wasn’t uncommon for one folktale to mix or combine with another to create a new legend altogether.

“Wait, you veered totally offtrack at some point, you drunkard. Tell us what Kagura and Yasaka Shrine have to do with it,” Ryouji barked, clearly the only sober one of the three.

Although Misato could drink like a fish, he wasn’t immune to getting drunk. He slumped further onto the bar every ten minutes, gradually melting into a Misato-shaped pile. “Mmgh, well...” he ventured, his brow furrowing. “In Nagaso, they used to make offerings of adzuki beans to the gods of Mount Kagura instead of human sacrifices... And then, during that nasty famine, someone stole the beans. They had to sacrifice a child instead, and that child was deified at Yasaka Shrine. At least, that’s how I understand it...”

According to the story of Yasaka Shrine’s founding, the deity worshipped there had been an innocent girl who was murdered unjustly. No documents specifically referred to the girl as a human

sacrifice, yet what records remained described the reason for her killing as “Theft of the sacred adzuki beans.” The surviving details of the origins of Nagaso Yasaka Shrine went like so:

One year, due to a long spell of rain following the summer season, Nagaso’s rice crop was incredibly poor. After the shogunate’s annual rice tax was fulfilled, there wasn’t enough left for the villagers to eat. Every single one of them was starving. Under those circumstances, somebody stole the reserve of adzuki beans that had been stored in case of famine.

In search of the culprit, the enraged villagers forced their way into the house of a family who had long been ostracized for their history of thieving. The family consisted of a poor husband and wife and their daughter. The trio insisted upon their innocence, but the angry villagers refused to listen. The father in particular was harshly interrogated, and eventually he was driven to madness. He marched behind the house, picked up a hatchet, seized his daughter, and cut her stomach open right in front of the villagers’ very eyes. Her emptied intestines showed no sign of the missing beans, forcibly proving that the family was not to blame.

The villagers, in a state of grief and pity for the cruelly murdered girl, decided to erect a shrine at the foot of the mountain in her honor. That shrine was Nagaso Yasaka Shrine. Over time the villagers of Nagaso came to regard adzuki beans as food for the divine. Instead of harvesting the beans for both human consumption and use in religious offerings to the gods of Mount Kagura, the village focused solely on producing adzuki beans to be presented at Yasaka Shrine. Eating the beans became a strict taboo.

It was a grisly and miserable tale. Misato had yet to find any documents that cited a specific year for the shrine’s construction, but the historical context of the famine led him to believe it took place during the Edo period.

There was yet another adzuki bean story, however, and it centered around Kagura Shrine instead:

Whenever Nagaso suffered famine or drought, the villagers followed an ancient tradition of sacrificing a child less than seven years of age to placate the mountain gods. On one such occasion, a wandering pilgrim took pity on the child and forbade their immolation, instructing the villagers to make a straw effigy and pack its abdomen with adzuki beans. Adzuki beans were a crop that had been harvested in East Asia since antiquity, and their vivid

crimson color was said to imbue them with spiritual power. As such, they were often used in religious dishes and ceremonies. Furthermore, Chinese myth insinuated that *manju*—one of the most popular traditional Japanese sweets—was initially created to replace human sacrifices. Like manju, the straw figure was full of red beans and conjured the image of a human stuffed with viscera. So it made a good substitute.

Misato couldn't say whether the original stories had been obfuscated due to intentional acts of misdirection or the simple advance of time. Regardless, considering the two tales together, it was safe to assume that the sacred adzuki beans reserved for times of famine in the first account were the very same beans used to stuff the effigy in the second. The Abnormal Disaster Unit therefore theorized that because the adzuki beans intended for the decoy were stolen, the girl was offered up as a human sacrifice in its place that year. Then, as time passed, there arose a custom of directing all adzuki beans to Yasaka Shrine in penance for the girl's death.

"What the hell? You're telling me they seriously used to sacrifice humans there? For real?" Hirose said hoarsely, rubbing at his arms. He shivered as though the mere story had chilled him to the bone—understandably so.

"Mm-hmm... So that's how the whole thing with bein' seven years old in traditional age came about, huh?" said Ryouji. He crossed his arms and stared up at the ceiling in thought. "That sure is a pretty gruesome tale. But...it still doesn't add up. Ya need more info, I think. I mean... All of this stuff has nothing to do with playing hide-and-seek or tag or whatever."

"Tsujiimoto's already on it, but...it sounds like there are parts of the story that weren't physically recorded, so we might hafta do some legwork..." slurred Misato. "The Tagamis were extremely helpful, so at least we have their version of the story, but... Hirose, what on earth did you tell them? They were treating me like... *royalty* or something." The Tagamis had given him the warmest welcome he'd experienced since coming to Tomoe—no—since he even *began* working as an onmyoji.

"Huh...?" replied Hirose, wrinkling his brow in confusion. "I dunno. I just thought they'd be more receptive if they took your appearance as a good thing rather than a weird one, so I said... Oh, yeah! I remember. I mentioned, uh, that one onmyoji from that one movie... Abe no Seimei, right? Yeah. I told them a young guy with

hair like Abe no Seimei wanted to visit them. Sounds like my grandma ate that right up.”

A huge guffaw punctuated the end of Hirose’s recollection. Ryouji doubled over, holding his stomach as he cackled unreservedly. That time, Misato really did smush his face into the bar top, overcome with embarrassment. His impact against the counter sent his chopsticks flying with a resounding *rattle*.

“Abe no Seimei’s one of the most famous onmyoji in history! Why would you hype me up like that...?” he groaned. “I barely feel qualified to call myself an onmyoji, never mind compare myself to him...”

Despite what Abe no Seimei may have been like as a real person, as a fictional character he was often represented as a superhero with dashing good looks. Misato felt extremely uncomfortable being compared to such a renowned onmyoji when he wasn’t even sure he counted as a *real* onmyoji himself. Juxtaposed with the famed government officials of the Heian period, Misato was more akin to a clueless folk medium who had no idea what he was doing with his life.

Nevertheless, the Narukami clan of onmyoji had their roots in an era that preceded even the prestigious figures of the Heian period: The Age of the Gods. While their name had changed along with the times, the same bloodline persisted in practicing clan members in the present day. Consanguine marriages had been periodically arranged over the ages in order to preserve the purity of Narukami blood; thus clan members inherited the power to conduct special rituals imparted only to descendants of the Dragon God even still.

“Really? Are there different sorts of onmyoji? Fake ones and whatever? Huh. I can’t tell the difference, so don’t blame me.” Hirose shrugged. Apparently, his was the perception the general population had of the profession.

“Ugh. Whatever,” Misato exhaled with a sigh.

“I know,” piped up Ryouji suddenly, worming his way back into the conversation since he had nothing to cook. “For Halloween next year, you should dress up in a *kariginu* and an *eboshi* hat like the ones all the old onmyoji used to wear back in the Heian period!”

“If *you* go as a *tengu*, I’ll think about it. We can put you in Shugendo monk garb and make you wear the tall geta sandals and

everything. Don't forget the feathery fan, too," Misato retorted.

"Alright—you said it!" Ryouji said gleefully. "Hey, boss! Me and Misato are gonna dress up for Halloween next year!"

"If ya must! But you won't catch me in one!" a rough voice called out from the back, evidently that of his manager.

"Gotcha," Ryouji said with a salute.

Misato cast Ryouji a sidelong glance before downing his shouchuu in one brisk swig.

RYOJI Karino was a psychic.

His biggest client was a real estate agency. They often tasked him with exorcising haunted properties, buildings slated for demolition, and empty plots of land with spiritual significance. Ryouji's recent quality of work had drawn the attention of other real estate agents in the area; the agency he primarily contracted with had gained somewhat of a reputation for successfully dealing with any spiritual disturbance the others encountered.

"We're not an exorcism agency or nothin', for crying out loud!" the company president often lamented. Ryouji, on the other hand, was only too grateful for the additional jobs. Ryouji had first met the president almost two years before and was thinking of buying the man a crate of expensive beer as an end-of-year gift to make up for his trouble.

After months of property exorcisms, Ryouji was quite surprised to receive a missing persons request one day.

The president of the real estate agency was equally puzzled. "They came all the way from Shimane just to ask for our help. This is just the feelin' I get, but...I'm not sure they were the respectable sort, if y'know what I mean. Just be careful, yeah?" he said.

When involved with real estate, one inevitably came across criminals or the yakuza every so often. That was why the president took such pride in his discerning intuition—he claimed he saw gangsters often enough.

The business card that the unknown party had given him was embossed with a company name and title in neat lettering. The headquarters was in Izumo, but it was a large organization with branches in Tokyo and Osaka as well.

“*Narukami Consultants...*?” Ryouji enunciated hesitantly. The name certainly stuck out to him.

The real estate agency was located on the first floor of a small building opposite Tomoe Station. Ryouji was sitting at the counter, backdropped by walls plastered with various descriptions of buildings. He propped his chin on his hand as he leaned forward, humming to himself in thought. It was lunchtime on a weekday, so thankfully there weren’t any customers to be scared away by Ryouji’s thuggish visage.

“That’s right. They claim they’re some construction consulting firm, I dunno. They’re apparently a big corporation that deals with major construction companies, but I’m a tad wary of all that,” the president grumbled.

Ryouji slouched back in his chair and folded his arms. “*Narukami*,” he mouthed to himself. *Narukami Consultants. From Izumo. Are you kidding me?*

“Nah, nah—hold up a sec here,” Ryouji said, a realization causing his lips to stiffen awkwardly. “They’re lookin’ for a missing person, you say?”

After departing the agency, Ryouji looked up the company himself. He found their website, which only convinced him further—*Narukami Consultants* was owned by Misato’s family.

He sank down in the driver’s seat of his car, looking back and forth between his phone and the business card. He punched in the number written on the card before hesitating. *Should I really call ’em?* He deliberated for a few moments.

The focus of their consultancy no doubt centered around using astrology and feng shui to determine their clients’ fortunes or performing other services such as exorcism and purification rites. Ryouji couldn’t help but be impressed by how well they utilized the most generic corporate jargon in their company description and brand philosophy to disguise the family’s true nature. The name of the company president was listed along with a photo, but unfortunately, the man didn’t appear to be Misato’s father.

“Guess the ol’ president’s claims about his intuition ain’t just for show, huh? He’s right—the *Narukamis* sure aren’t the respectable sort,” he muttered, pushing a cigarette between his lips. The price of tobacco had increased again that fall. Ryouji had to admit that he hated the smoke, yet he refused to switch to a vape or e-cigarette. The exposed flame of traditional cigarettes had often

been extremely advantageous on jobs.

So, this missing person search... Is it for Misato? It's pretty freakin' late for that, though. Besides, what the hell does a huge clan of mediums want with a crude, small-time psychic like me?

Ryouji questioned whether he would be able to find someone that even the *oh-so powerful* Narukami clan couldn't track down. Had the family contacted him because they'd gleaned some information as to Misato's whereabouts and decided to sniff around? In any case, it was highly unsettling.

Misato—his poverty-stricken lodger who'd been drinking at the bar only a few days earlier—professed to have his father's contact details, and his father his. Ryouji got the sense that they hadn't actually kept in touch, but even so, it was just bizarre to launch a search effort for the guy five years after he ran away from home.

(Incidentally, Ryouji had ended up taking Misato home after his heavy drinking session. All his stress from work seemed to have made him drink past his limit that night. Although he'd apparently made plans to stay at Hirose's place, he was so drunk by the end of the night that Ryouji had feared that the white snake spirit inside him might escape.)

Ryouji had two choices at the moment: call the number immediately or discuss the matter with Misato first.

"I gotta find out about this Shinichi Wakatake," he murmured, glaring at the business card in his hand. "What's the time? Just past one, huh...? Misato might be on his lunch break if I'm lucky."

He exited the keypad and opened up a messaging app instead. He typed a whole paragraph, explaining the situation as succinctly as possible. A read receipt popped up as soon as he sent it. The message he received in reply was brief.

"Can I call you?"

Chapter 4: Hide and Seek

“NOT yeeet!”

Katsuki froze at the sound of a young, familiar voice echoing from afar. He recognized it as his brother’s from a game of hide-and-seek tag many years before—the only time Misato had ever hidden from Katsuki instead of the other way around. If Katsuki couldn’t find and catch his brother, he’d be doomed to remain the demon forevermore.

His connection to a spiritual pathway was interrupted, and he suddenly felt his previously numb feet crunching against the dry leaves that littered the sloped ground.

“Are you ready?” That time, what sounded like a young girl called out from a different direction somewhere nearby.

“Not yeeet!” the young boy’s voice replied once more.

Katsuki turned, heading toward the phantom voice. The sun seemed to have long since set, but for some strange reason, Katsuki could see exactly where he needed to go. He could sense the faint presence of a pale glowing object, and each time it repeated the words in that carefree tone, Katsuki strained his eyes to look at it.

Eventually he could make out the silhouette of a tiny, human-shaped paper doll floating in the air, its twisted fibers gleaming white. The strip of paper tied around its torso continued to answer the girl’s call, over and over.

“Are you ready?”

“Not yeeet!”

It was a shikigami. A *Narukami* shikigami. And Katsuki was certain that Misato had created it.

The shikigami floated aimlessly, carried along by the mountain wind as it ceaselessly responded to the young girl’s query. Katsuki found himself drawn to the doll—so much so, that he haphazardly lost his footing in his panicked attempt to catch up to it.

“Ack!” he yelled, landing heavily on his behind after tripping over a fallen tree. A tremendous rustling of brush accompanied his fall. At the very least, he was fortunate that the other side of the

trunk didn't give way to a sharp drop.

"Are you okay?" a nearby voice asked.

"Yeah, I'm fi—" *Crap.* He'd answered without even thinking. Katsuki lifted his face to see a girl wearing a plain, faded kimono with frayed hems. She appeared to be around ten years old.

From that night forth, Katsuki lost count of how many days he'd been in the mountains. All he could recollect was a haze-like blur.

IT was the afternoon after Ryouji had first been put in contact with Narukami Consultants. He'd wasted no time in arranging to meet face-to-face with the man called Wakatake.

Wakatake wore black-rimmed glasses to match his black hair, was dressed in a finely tailored suit...and looked like the very definition of a square. Ryouji, flashiness incarnate, sat opposite him. They'd agreed to meet at a small, cozy, unassuming coffee shop in the center of Tomoe. Unlike the kinds of cafés that were popular with young people, it reeked of a bygone era—the type of place that worldly-wise sorts seemed to be fond of.

There were no other customers. Though, if anyone were to have seen the smartly dressed, thirty-something-year-old man speaking to some young, bleached-blond thug in a baseball jacket, describing the scene as "absurd" would have been an understatement.

The guy even slicks his hair back, for crying out loud.

"Thanks for trustin' me with your case—or, at least, that's what I'd usually say," Ryouji said with an acrid laugh. "What the hell does a big-time company like you people want with a homespun psychic like me? It's not like sniffin' people out is my area of expertise, either." His tone dripped with hostility from the moment he parted his lips, his smile wide and threatening.

He popped a cigarette in his mouth and grabbed an ashtray, which he set it in front of him with an obnoxious *clank*. He sank back into the arrogantly upholstered booth, slouching while Wakatake gazed at him indifferently from over those black-rimmed glasses. The coffee shop was one of the last few, precious establishments that still allowed smoking. Come lunch—or

dinnertime—the place overflowed with people who couldn't bear to go without their nicotine fix for even a moment.

“Due to the urgency of the matter, we are asking any individuals in the area who claim to be in the same line of work to provide us with information,” replied Wakatake in a stiff, formal tone.

Judging by his patronizing attitude, Ryouji could safely conclude that they were reaching out to any and all psychics, no matter their ability. He'd been wary of the Narukami family to begin with, and that revelation only caused his impression of them to plummet further.

“Wow. What an honor,” Ryouji scoffed, lighting the cigarette with no regard for the man across from him. Drawing the smoke deep into his lungs helped calm him a little.

According to Misato, Wakatake was tutor to the next head of the family. In other words, the person who had gone missing and was being sought so thoroughly was Misato's younger brother, Katsuki Narukami.

Entirely unruffled by the cloud of smoke that Ryouji was spitefully blowing in his direction, Wakatake continued, somewhat loftily, “You are not to breathe a word of this matter to anyone else.”

Ryouji wanted to snap at him and point out the hypocrisy of spreading the news of the kid's disappearance in the first place, but he got the feeling that the observation would fall on deaf ears. Instead, he simply urged Wakatake to proceed with a sharp jerk of his chin.

A mile or two from the café, Misato was most likely in the main Town Hall building, nervous and utterly incapable of focusing on his work. He'd managed to guess what had happened based solely on Ryouji's lengthy text message, and the loss of composure that followed was truly horrendous. When Ryouji returned home that night, he was subjected to an extended rant about how Katsuki had such bad luck and the adults back home were all far too incompetent to properly care for the boy. It was as if all of the frustration and worry Misato had previously been unable to voice due to guilt over abandoning his family had exploded all at once.

Apparently, both of Katsuki's parents were so preoccupied that he'd effectively been left to raise himself. His tutor was a stuffy, strict man who never considered Katsuki's feelings. In fact, the

household as a whole seemed heedless of the fact that Katsuki was his own person, and they had no inkling of his personality, talents, or dreams. After hearing years' worth of complaints to that effect the night prior, Ryouji had been fully conditioned to see the Narukami family as a band of heinous monsters.

"Have you seen this young man at any point during the last week? He's around five foot five and was likely last wearing a navy blue school blazer," Wakatake said unfeelingly, holding out a photograph.

Ryouji cast an eye over it. Like his brother, the boy in the photo was pretty. He had slightly wavy, brown hair, and his large, almond-shaped eyes were particularly striking. Misato had once explained that while he'd inherited his "plain" features from their father, Katsuki was the epitome of beauty, with prominent, symmetrical facial features. Looking at the photo, Ryouji could see what he meant. Even so, over the past few days, Ryouji had learned that his impoverished tenant had a *serious* soft spot for his little brother.

"Nah. Never seen him before." *Heard about him plenty, though.* "And just who is this dude, anyway?" Ryouji plowed on bitterly. "It's not like you're the police or anythin'. Are you going 'round showin' him to other people, too? Surely you gotta know that no one's gonna give you any information unless you give them a legit reason to."

They glared at each other as they waited for their coffee. Ryouji clunked his elbow onto the armrest, cigarette in hand, whereas Wakatake's posture remained plank straight. A sullen look made its way onto the other man's face, to which Ryouji responded merely by propping his cheek on his fist. He'd lost quite a bit of edge after spending two years in the countryside, but when all was said and done, Ryouji *did* come from an underworld background.

"The young man I showed you is Master Katsuki Narukami, the next head of the Narukami clan," relented Wakatake.

"Pff. So your heir's skedaddled on ya. That's a pretty big scandal, huh?" Ryouji cackled as he crushed the stub of his cigarette into the ashtray.

Wakatake sidestepped Ryouji's barb with the utmost grace, flawlessly ignoring him. "Master Katsuki didn't simply run away from home; there's a chance that he's somewhere the police have no way of investigating," Wakatake said sternly. "If he is moving via

spiritual pathway, it would be wisest to investigate locations where those routes are most likely to materialize. You must be versed in the region's sacred sites, no?"

"Don'tcha think you'd have more luck askin' the town hall about that sorta crap? No one knows more about spiritual activity in the area than those guys." Ryouji snorted, sliding a second cigarette from the box. Wakatake's true character shone through his words, and Ryouji wasn't enamored with the way his tone oozed snobbery. "Pretty disappointing that the *great* Narukami clan are the kinda cowards who have to tiptoe around whisperin' to small-time psychics 'cause they can't even face one tiny town hall in the countryside," Ryouji snickered. "Oh—or maybe that's just *your* style?"

"I'm under no obligation to tell you."

"Ah-ah-ah," Ryouji tutted, waggling his finger. "You're tryna *hire* me, remember? Like I said, I'm not gonna make any deals with a client that can't even give me a proper explanation. I dunno what you're expectin', but I think I should make this clear: I'm not doin' *anything* under the table. I send all my clients a quote, contract, invoice, *and* receipt. This is a real business, y'know?"

Part of him wanted to say, "If the job's something you don't want recorded on paper, then forget about it," but he knew that he'd be of no help to Misato that way. In spite of his appearance, Ryouji kept his nose clean. He was sure that to most people, his profession didn't seem "clean" in the slightest, but he wasn't in any trouble with the tax office and always stayed on top of his paperwork to ensure that he could win a legal battle if a dispute arose. And fortunately, practice of the occult wasn't a crime in itself in the modern age.

Perhaps his origins and personal history were suspicious; that didn't mean he had to live dishonestly in the present. On the contrary: that he had very little to fall back on only further necessitated meticulous bookkeeping. The creation of legitimate contracts required a good command of language, and although Ryouji hadn't even completed his compulsory education, several adults had a hand in teaching him his letters when he was younger.

Wakatake had fallen silent, clearly seething in response to the fact that some thug would dare to take the upper hand of the situation.

"Besides, you shoulda come at this from a whole different

angle. It woulda been way more persuasive if you'd said, 'We handpicked the most capable psychics in the area,' don'tcha think?" huffed Ryouji with a raised brow. "Why did ya choose this town, anyway? Don't tell me you threw a dart at a map and called it a day. I'm just sayin', this is all too shady for my liking. It's not like I choose the jobs I get, but I hate clients who aren't upfront about contracts or what my responsibilities will be. If you've got some kinda pro forma agreement, I'll stick to it. It's all about trust in this line of work, y'know?"

Ryouji presented the way he did purely due to personal taste, and people often assumed he was the type of person who couldn't even read kanji characters. *How the heck would I read Buddhist scripture if I didn't know how to read kanji, idiot?* Ryouji occasionally had the urge to voice that thought aloud, but he figured there was no point wasting his breath on people who probably thought that prayers, sutras, and mantras were all the same thing.

"The specifics are confidential, but rest assured this is a request from the head of the Narukami family himself. You will most definitely be compensated for your work. We have selected certain areas to comb through based on rudimentary evidence, but it is indeed the case that we're investigating all surrounding areas branching out from Izumo."

If not Tomoe, there were other local governments in Hiroshima Prefecture that specialized in spiritual affairs. Given that the Narukamis were avoiding those more official routes and instead hiring freelancers, Ryouji could only surmise that they were trying to save face and uphold their prestige by keeping their shortcomings under wraps.

"For cryin' out loud, you big shots need your hands held," Ryouji muttered. "All right, all right. I'll take on your request. BUT—like I said—I've got no expertise in trackin' folks down, and I've only lived in Tomoe for about two years. If you'll take that into account, then we've got ourselves a deal." He nodded, straightening in his chair as if to say, "I'm listening." Not that he'd ever intended whatsoever to shoot down the guy's proposal and kick him out of the café; he just had to establish dominance in order to conduct business smoothly. He couldn't very well work for someone who looked down on him.

"Very well. So—" Wakatake began, only to be interrupted when a waiter materialized at their booth. The server placed a

coffee float topped with thick vanilla ice cream in front of Ryouji and a cup of steaming black coffee before Wakatake.

“Oh—could I get two syrups?” Ryouji asked with two fingers in the air, stopping the waiter as they placed small portions of syrup and milk on either side of the table. He liked his coffee as sweet as possible. “And are ya gonna use that?” he piped up again, his eyebrows arching as he indicated the syrup in front of Wakatake.

“No,” Wakatake replied brusquely, shaking his head.

“Nice.” He leaned over the table to snatch it for himself. After dumping all available syrup and milk into his coffee and stirring it with the straw, he suddenly felt a lot more motivated to deal with the situation at hand.

Thus, Wakatake started his account:

Katsuki Narukami had gone missing on Friday afternoon of the previous week. The Narukami family had received the witness statement of a bus driver who claimed that a male high school student had boarded his vehicle at the stop closest to their estate. He reported that the student had gotten off one stop before the bus’s final destination of Izumo Grand Shrine. That penultimate stop was located in the foothills of a nearby mountain, and the boy was believed to have headed up the slope before disappearing.

Depending on region or family history, there was a variety of names for the paths that the dead or spirits used to navigate the world. Some called them *nawame*, while others referred to them as *nawasuji*, *mamono-suji*, or *madou*. A famous tale from the Setouchi region in particular mentioned their existence, yet the pathways could be found throughout Japan, though with different names or forms according to the local folklore. Essentially, they served as both entrance and exit for supernatural beings, and to build on or obstruct them with anything man-made was sacrilege.

Many such *nawame*, big and small, wound through the holy precincts surrounding Izumo Grand Shrine. They veined the mountains, fissures in the realm of the living that, as most stories alleged, functioned as gateways for gods, specters, and other entities to pass to and from the Other Side. If a human had gotten lost in one, they would more than likely have been spirited away.

“So you’re tryna tell me Katsuki gave you the slip by traveling along a *nawame*?” guessed Ryouji, dubious. He just barely managed to refrain from calling the guy insane.

The far end of a *nawame*—the spirit world—was beyond the

boundary of where it was possible for a human to live, linked to a forever unchanging domain of death. In plain terms, it wasn't humanly possible for someone to intentionally transport themselves via nawame.

Even so, Wakatake nodded with conviction. "Precisely. With guidance, naturally."

Apparently, the clan had narrowed down Katsuki's whereabouts to northern Hiroshima with Narukami divination. But they were unable to pin down an exact location, and five days had passed without progress. The clan theorized that he was still wandering the spirit world, and so they had begun reaching out to mediums in the area at the beginning of the week.

"Ya think he's being guided, huh...? Well, sure, if there was someone who actually *could* guide him. Either way, you've got a pretty reckless little lord on your hands there," Ryouji pointed out. He could understand why Misato was so worried.

He could *not* believe the next words that fell from Wakatake's thin lips: "In fact, we *do* think somebody summoned him through that channel," the man said, clearing his throat. "Are you aware that there is another Narukami son? He became rather infamous around five years ago; people called him the 'Snake Eater.' It was most likely he that called for Master Katsuki. His name is Misato Narukami."

"...The *hell* are you sayin'?" responded Ryouji crudely, his tone raising a few octaves as he automatically returned Wakatake's scowl unblinkingly. Of course, he knew all about the other Narukami son. In fact, Ryouji could probably guess where the guy was, what he was doing, and what he was thinking at that very moment with about seventy or eighty percent accuracy. So he knew *exactly* how absurd and incoherent Wakatake's theory was.

This dude's talkin' complete crap. He thinks Misato would try to kidnap his brother or something? Nah—but is that why he came all the way out here to talk to me? Wait, no. There shouldn't be any way for them to know that I'm connected to Misato... Does that mean they really are tryna track him down? They can't be, Misato said his old man wouldn't do anything like that.

Suspicion and bewilderment whirled through his mind. There was no noticeable change in Wakatake's expression, however, so it at least *appeared* that he hadn't implicated Misato to purposely provoke Ryouji into revealing their relationship. *I gotta calm down*

before I start to look weird.

Ryouji slurped at the remains of his float, which was mostly just water by that point. The sound echoed through the empty café. A group of boisterous schoolgirls passed by the front window, chatting animatedly. It seemed to be exam season.

“I believe you said you moved here two years ago, no? Then I suppose it’s understandable that you’re unaware of the situation,” Wakatake sighed. “The head of the Narukami clan fathered two sons. His wife is Master Katsuki’s mother. However, his other son was born out of wedlock—that being Master Misato. Master Misato is quite a bit older than Master Katsuki; he must be around twenty-two or twenty-three years old by now. Though the elder son, he was never in the running to inherit the Narukami estate due to his illegitimate birth. But I suppose the head wanted to raise him to become Master Katsuki’s aide.” His tone shifted when he began to talk about Misato, as if he harbored particularly strong feelings toward the guy.

When Ryouji picked up on the ever-so-slight darkness that tinted Wakatake’s speech, he regained his composure and readjusted his posture. He needed to draw as much information as possible out of Wakatake, and his intuition was yelling at him to do so without betraying anything about himself.

Wakatake was searching for Katsuki just like Misato was. But he was very much not on their side.

“Master Misato was a...talented boy. He had a flair for academia as well as incantations. Yet...for the most part, he was a thoroughly disturbed young man who was gifted with far, *far* too much ancestral power.”

Ryouji replied with a noncommittal hum, feigning neutrality. Instead of popping his next cigarette into his mouth, he twiddled it between his fingers, his hands resting on the table as he waited for Wakatake to continue. The disgust that exuded from the other man’s words sent a scraping discomfort across the pit of Ryouji’s stomach. Wakatake’s opinion of “Master Misato” didn’t quite fit the image of the penniless lodger that *Ryouji* knew.

Wakatake had yet to touch his coffee. The cup steamed in front of him, the flavor gradually deteriorating. “Unfortunately, that power of his backfired on us and has rendered him untraceable, though I believe he is still alive. Master Katsuki loved him dearly, you see, so if Master Misato were to summon him...”

“Yeah? Ya got any solid evidence that makes you think it was him?” Ryouji couldn’t resist asking. Misato had told Ryouji that he said a proper goodbye to his father upon leaving home. He had also explained that he’d been publicly branded as “untraceable” because that was a way for his family to rid themselves of the expectation to look for him.

Considering the Narukami clan’s prior disinterest in doing so, as well as the fact that Misato lived only a two-hour drive down the expressway *and* was openly employed by the government in the same field...his family most likely wasn’t trying to pursue him. If they were, they easily could have found him by that point. Therefore, Wakatake’s conjecture about Misato’s role in Katsuki’s disappearance was probably no more than a personal grudge.

I could tell there was some instability in the clan from what Misato told me, but...this is getting stupid.

“Sounds like ya really hate this Misato guy, huh?” smirked Ryouji, slipping the tortured cigarette between his lips and flicking his lighter. If Wakatake was Katsuki’s tutor, he probably wasn’t all too grateful that Misato had assumed the majority of his duties back in the day. And Misato didn’t have anything nice to say about Wakatake either.

Ryouji narrowed his eyes scornfully, but Wakatake was only too happy to elaborate. “Of course, I have grounds to suspect him,” he said with a nod. “Around ten years ago, he attempted to abduct Master Katsuki.”

“Abduct him?” Ryouji repeated, raising one eyebrow. “What for? I mean...it was ten years ago, right? Surely the guy was no more than a kid himself.” Misato must have been in middle school at the time. Why the hell did Wakatake think a small child would want to kidnap an even smaller child? Furthermore, Ryouji had never heard hint of the story before, so he seriously doubted its validity.

“It’s possible he was planning to kill Master Katsuki and install himself as next in line to become the family head.”

“Wow,” Ryouji replied simply. He sank back into the booth, bracing an insolent elbow atop the backrest. The urge to call the man a goddamn idiot rose high in his throat. He barely swallowed it down by sucking in a huge lungful of cigarette smoke. *Patience, Ryouji. Stay calm. You got this.* He pursed his lips in an effort to keep his rage from boiling over. “But ain’t he missing anyway? I was all

the way over in Tokyo back when he vanished, and even *I've* heard of the Snake Eater. D'ya really think he'd try to inherit the clan after such a life-changing scandal?"

I ain't got a clue who this dude thinks he's talking about, but it's not the Misato I know.

Ryouji peered at Wakatake. There was no way for their gazes to ever truly meet—two pairs of lenses separated them. He wore his usual sunglasses, and Wakatake those thick, black-rimmed spectacles.

"It's precisely *because* of the scandal that I believe he might try again. The power the boy possesses is excessive; it was disproportionate to his standing within the clan, certainly," Wakatake said impassively. In other words, Misato's immense power would have been perfectly acceptable had he been a *legitimate* child. "He is a blight on the Narukamis. An Outsider whose sole purpose is to send the clan into disarray. As for the 'scandal,' it was really a matter of desperate times calling for desperate measures. And in my opinion, the outcome was beneficial, s—"

CLASH. The sound of an ashtray slamming onto the wooden table rang through the small coffee shop. A cloud of ash and cigarette butts flew into the air as Ryouji exhaled a puff of smoke.

That last comment had pushed him over the edge. To hide his anger, he readjusted his sunglasses while tucking his chin toward his chest. He stubbed his half-smoked cigarette into the ashtray and slowly crossed his arms before trusting himself to talk. "I couldn't give less of a damn about your little family feud. Stop talkin' garbage and actually tell me about the case," he snarled.

Wakatake didn't seem to have pieced together the real reason for Ryouji's sudden anger. He stared down his nose at Ryouji in displeasure, unimpressed by such uncouth behavior. "Very well," he sighed. "I theorize that Master Katsuki disappeared while following the call of his brother. What I'd like *you* to do is research the most likely locations for nawame as well as look into any rumors concerning Misato Narukami. We can work out the specifics of compensation at a later date, but I hope this will suffice as an advance payment," he said, holding out a check.

Eagle-eyed, Ryouji noted that the sum was considerably larger than what he would usually charge. It appeared Wakatake had intended to slap him across the face with a wad of cash from the

very start if necessary.

“That’ll do fine,” Ryouji mumbled curtly, stuffing the check in his wallet as he rose from his seat. His wallet chain jingled as he moved.

Misato Narukami, huh...?

That man no longer existed. The broke civil servant living in Ryouji’s house was a Miyazawa through and through. The eldest son of the Narukami family had been attacked by a parasitic snake five years before and had vanished both factually and in spirit. As a member of the Narukami clan, Wakatake must have been aware of that... Ryouji was totally bewildered as to who exactly Wakatake pictured when he closed his eyes and thought of Misato, because it wasn’t the man Ryouji saw. The fact that he insisted on calling Misato a Narukami was a little bemusing.

Ryouji kept his eyes trained on Wakatake’s face, studying him carefully. Despite his hatred of Misato and his plea to Ryouji to do some sleuthing, he hardly seemed to care about Katsuki’s whereabouts or Misato’s current life. The scant emotion Ryouji could discern on his face suggested he was merely irritated by the inconvenience of trouble in the family.

Glancing down at the man still sitting in the booth, Ryouji lifted a lighter to what had, at some point, become his last cigarette. He crushed the empty carton in his fist and stuffed it back into his baseball jacket pocket along with the lighter, glaring at Wakatake all the while.

“I’ll just put one missing persons case on the quote, yeah? If there’s anythin’ you don’t really wanna say out loud, feel free to send an email to the address I gave ya. I’ll add any hush money to the bill myself, so don’t worry ’bout that.” He paused for a moment to take a drag from his cigarette. Then, removing it from his lips, he unashamedly blew a cloud of smoke right into Wakatake’s face. He uttered a scornful laugh when Wakatake flinched in response to the unexpected attack, before grinding the unfinished cigarette into the ashtray. “I’ll find Katsuki for ya in no time.” He grinned, turning his back on Wakatake.

And then I’ll chase you damn Narukamis out of Tomoe the first chance I get.

Ryouji left the coffee shop with that ambition singing in his chest.

THE minute hand had just passed four thirty in the afternoon when Haruka Tsujimoto finally made it back to his desk. He'd been out on a job for the past three and a half hours. He removed his half-rimmed glasses and plopped down on his seat with a deep, heaving sigh.

Yoshida, who had returned to the office with Haruka, offloaded his briefcase onto his own desk and wordlessly began to search through a drawer. He then slipped a small cardboard box into his breast pocket and left the room; he'd evidently granted himself a smoke break.

"Yeh must be exhausted," Ookubo called out sympathetically from where he sat diagonally across from Haruka.

"Sure am," Haruka said with a bitter laugh, letting his head droop. "It's like I'm dead on my feet."

One of their few female colleagues, Asaka, laughed in response from a group of neighboring desks. She was one of the administrative staff and in her forties—about ten years older than Haruka. That year was her sixth in the Abnormal Disaster Unit, which was a considerable feat. No more than an administrator, she had no sensitivity to spirits, nor could she perform any rituals or incantations. Yet her breadth of knowledge was by no means average, so her coworkers admired her greatly.

"I know that look; you went to visit the Board of Education, didn'tcha? Was it the Social Education Division again?" Asaka surmised.

Haruka nodded, wiping his slightly cloudy glasses clean.

The Board of Education was located in a different building about a ten-minute drive from the Abnormal Disaster Unit office. The Social Education Division focused not only on encouraging physical education and learning lifelong skills, but also supervising cultural assets. Many of the assets the division protected were shrines and temples or natural monuments such as ancient trees. In short, there was some overlap in jurisdiction between the two offices. The Social Education Division treated shrines and temples as inviolable landmarks, whereas the Disaster Unit wanted to put the sites to practical use and utilize their inherent spiritual powers.

Thus, two entirely different divisions with opposing policies were butting heads over the same sites. There was no hope of

coming to a peaceful understanding. And unfortunately, the Social Education Division was also in charge of the libraries that housed documents and data about the region, so the Abnormal Disaster Unit was often forced to submit to their will.

“We gotta try to talk to them about their curriculum one more time, too, just in case...” He was referring to the incident in Nagaso. The unit had finally managed to get the Board of Education to agree to discuss the “Our Local Crops” program in Tomoe and how to prevent a similar issue from occurring in the future.

“How was it?” Asaka asked.

“They said they’d give us a summary of the regional study program for all schools at the beginning of each year and allow us to tweak it however we want.” Haruka sighed again.

In other words, the Board of Education was foisting all the hard work onto the Disaster Unit—not that they could really help it. The school board didn’t exactly have the expertise required to distinguish whether something could cause a problem with regard to spiritual activity or taboos. And although Asaka had actually worked in the Social Education Division seven years prior (which made the Disaster Unit’s job much easier), it appeared nobody with even a cursory familiarity with the occult had replaced her when she transferred.

“Yeh’re kiddin’ me...” Ookubo groaned from the other side of a huge stack of files. “Ah, well. Guess we just hafta get on with it.” The unit’s volume of work had yet again increased without any new staff to make up for it.

“Miyazawa’s gonna have to pull out all the stops,” Haruka joked with a grin. Asaka and Ookubo both laughed heartily in response.

Miyazawa was hired after a specialist resigned the previous year, and he was far younger and far more powerful than his predecessor—who had really only been a temp with an extended contract. Miyazawa’s initial duties had been basic tasks and boring office work, but over time he was entrusted with even more practical assignments.

“Where is he, by the way?” Haruka asked, noticing that the seat next to him was empty. He squinted at the office blackboard to see if Miyazawa was out on a case, and Ookubo shook his head.

“He’s in no state to go on *any* jobs today,” Ookubo said, his eyebrows knitting together in concern. “I dunno what’s happened,

but his head's been in the clouds alllll day. I reckon he went out to buy coffee, though he's sure taking his time."

Miyazawa *had* seemed pretty tired that morning, Haruka recalled. He could only hope that nothing serious was going on in the young man's personal life.

"Eh, I betcha anything he was up playing games 'til silly o'clock," Asaka chuckled, swiping her hand through the air as if to brush off their unease. "My kiddo barely leaves his room when he's got a day off!"

"Right. Yeh know how young men are!" agreed Ookubo with a booming laugh. "He's gotta have some fun and do an all-nighter every once in a while. Yeh're too much of a worrywart, Tsujimoto."

Haruka wasn't sure he *did* know what Ookubo meant; evidently his colleague had a unique conception of what young men got up to at night. Ookubo and Asaka weren't completely unaware of Miyazawa's past, however, and tried to treat him as if he were the same as any other young person. Haruka, on the other hand, wasn't sure that was the best course of action—though his stance would certainly be laughed off as "overprotective" if he dared to voice it. He silently opened his laptop, his lips still pursed in anxiety.

Asaka soon interrupted his rumination by thrusting some documents into his face. "Oh aye, Tsujimoto..." she began, "I photocopied all the records we have about the shrines in Nagaso. The ones with red sticky notes are Yasaka Shrine, and the yellow ones are Kagura. There's nothing about the new info in there, though."

"Makes sense. Thanks," Haruka said, taking them with a nod of his head. Miyazawa had instituted some emergency countermeasures, yet the case was by no means solved. "All that stuff Miyazawa found out was word-of-mouth, after all." He sighed once more as he flipped to the pages marked with sticky notes.

Nagaso was so close to their office that it was only five minutes by car. Unlike the other villages that had become part of Tomoe through municipal mergers, Nagaso had been under the Abnormal Disaster Unit's jurisdiction for a long, long time. They never could have predicted that such a catastrophe would erupt right under their noses after so many years.

"People have really started focusin' more on heirloom plants and locally sourced produce lately, huh?" Ookubo commented, his

tone tinged with a certain exhaustion.

People moving to new areas and rediscovering plots of land wasn't a bad thing in itself; in fact, small, local governments couldn't survive without actively welcoming transplants. But the fact remained that the unit consequently had to deal with increasing numbers of inquiries involving regional crops.

"All we can do is ask around, to be honest," Haruka admitted, equally dismayed. "Apparently Mrs. Tagami's relatives were once in charge of Kagura Shrine, so we should probably check in with her."

The Disaster unit was confident in its hypothesis about the origins of the two shrines: First, the people of Nagaso started using an adzuki-filled straw effigy in place of the human sacrifices intended to appease the gods of Mount Kagura. Then, generations later, Yasaka Shrine was erected as a result of events that occurred during a famine in the Edo period. Yasaka Shrine allegedly housed a god that repelled evil and conferred bountiful harvests, so it appeared that the tragedy during the famine had led directly to the creation of a guardian deity of agriculture.

"Where did the name 'Yasaka' come from anyway, I wonder...?" Haruka mused aloud. There was another Yasaka Shrine, in Gion, Kyoto, which served as the main sanctuary of a particular Shinto cult: the Gion cult. The Gion cult worshipped a plague god on the premise that its placation would help suppress infectious diseases in the surrounding community. Given that the faith's followers were almost exclusive to Kyoto, the Gion cult was an extremely tiny sect nationally.

"Huh," Asaka replied with a thoughtful hum. "I didn't think about that. Oh—maybe it's something to do with that thing Hirose was talking about—"

She was rudely cut off by the shrill tone of a telephone. Both Asaka and Haruka automatically sealed their lips while Ookubo leaned over the unit manager's desk to pick up the clamorous receiver.

"Yes, this is Ookubo from the Abnormal Disaster Unit. Mm-hmm—sure, put them on," he answered in a well-practiced, professional tone. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. This is Ookubo from the Abnormal Disaster Unit at Tomoe Town Hall. Unfortunately, Yoshida is not presently in the office, but I can—... Oh, of course. Yes, I completely understand. Thank you very much, and I'm sorry I couldn't be of help. Thank you—bye."

He quietly placed the handset back on its latch, a fitting finish to the telephone etiquette he claimed to have learned from one of the main receptionists.

Asaka made sure the call had ended before speaking up. “I guess that was for the boss, then?” she asked.

“Aye.” Ookubo nodded. “They said they’d call back later, so seems like it. Agh, right—I should’ve asked for a name. Sounded like a young man, but tha’s all I got.”

I wonder who it was? Haruka was a little taken by surprise. Their unit wasn’t one that often received calls from other organizations or the general public.

“It’s unlikely that a regular civilian would ask for Yoshida specifically, so I reckon it’s gotta be someone else in the trade. Someone from another town, maybe?” suggested Haruka.

“Agh, I sure messed that one up,” Ookubo grumbled to himself as he jotted down the limited information he’d gleaned, using the top of Yoshida’s laptop as a writing surface.

Haruka cast his eyes back down at the files in front of him.

“So, erm... What was I saying again?” resumed Asaka with a jovial laugh.

“Yeh’d just started to talk about something Hirose said. About the azukiarai curse passed down in Nagaso, maybe?”

Aside from the origin stories of the two shrines, there were three other tales that revolved around Mount Kagura: the disappearances of Nagaso villagers, the curse of the azukiarai, and the ghostly game of tag.

“Well, we at least have evidence relating to the disappearances,” Haruka noted. “Mount Kagura has been treated as a sacred site for centuries, making it an extremely significant location in terms of spiritual activity. Therefore, we can conclude that a lot of the people who get lost end up traveling through the nawame that have formed there. You can easily call that a case of being spirited away. As for the azukiarai curse and the game of tag...those are more mysterious,” he said with a groan as he flicked through papers.

“So where the heck do the azukiarai fit into all this?” Ookubo sighed, deep in thought while he lingered next to Yoshida’s desk. He wasn’t really talking about the potential existence of an azukiarai itself, but rather the puzzle of yet another adzuki bean taboo that seemed unrelated to the tragic events that prompted

Yasaka Shrine's construction. Was the latter story not enough to stop people from eating the adzuki beans? Was it really necessary to add a curse into the mix?

Mrs. Tagami had recounted the tale of the curse like so:

Once, long ago, the people of Nagaso offered up a handful of adzuki beans to a local azukiarai every year. The rest of the beans that the villagers harvested were free for consumption. But in one particularly bad span of famine, the villagers resorted to eating the beans they'd otherwise dedicate to the azukiarai. By the following day, all those who had ingested the beans were covered in a full-body rash. The rash was so painful that, supposedly, the afflicted could do nothing but writhe in agony. Then the rash—at first a bright scarlet—would blacken in color and leak pus the same hue as dark red adzuki beans. Ever since, the people of Nagaso refused to eat adzuki beans in any form for fear of what might happen.

"And since they had those nasty rashes, that might be where the connection to Yasaka comes from!" Asaka proclaimed, gesturing excitedly in realization.

"Aye—good point," Haruka said with a nod. A full-body rash was a common symptom of some infectious diseases, after all. "So, basically, the tale branched off somewhere down the line. Instead of the curse originating with the girl worshipped at Yasaka Shrine, in the other story it was at the hands of an azukiarai. But still...now we're facing another question: why would the girl who was sacrificed be cursing people?" Haruka wondered, propping one elbow up on his desk and resting his chin in his palm.

Perhaps when the villagers tried to sacrifice the girl rather than an empty-bellied straw effigy, the sacrifice failed somehow. If that was the case, they needed to know why. Something really, really bad must have happened. Something so awful that the people felt they had to build a shrine in order to pacify the girl. But the information the unit had gathered was too patchy to draw a cohesive picture of what exactly had transpired.

"Yeh're right," Ookubo agreed, cricking his stiff neck from side to side while Haruka continued to hum in thought. He froze as if something had suddenly occurred to him. "Come to think of it, the folktale at Tomoe Elementary School about playing tag—that originated in Nagaso too, right?"

Haruka nodded again. The third and final tale that had bolstered the taboo of adzuki bean consumption was centered

around a ghostly game of tag. Because the legend was solely spread by children, the details surrounding it were even vaguer. Mrs. Tagami heard the story when she was a child but insisted that one of the older students at school had told her. It seemed the tale went back much further than anticipated.

The worn, rickety sliding door rattled in its track behind Haruka as someone entered the office.

“Right. So, both the azukiarai and tag legends resulted in Nagaso forbidding the consumption of adzuki beans—just like the story behind Yasaka Shrine. And as we know, it turns out that being cursed to play tag is real...” Haruka said ponderously. That made it extremely likely that the tag curse was related to the young girl deified at Yasaka Shrine. Then the obvious question was how the game had started in the first place.

Haruka tossed the file onto his desk with a sigh, abandoning his confused train of thought.

“In that case, the curse of the azukiarai might be real, too, huh?” someone piped up from behind him. It was Yoshida’s voice; he’d finally returned from his prolonged smoke break.

Chapter 5: Brothers

AFTER meeting with Wakatake, Ryouji went to his part-time job at the bar as normal.

No—it was wrong to say “as normal.” He’d forced himself to go into work to wash dishes when he’d originally intended to take the night off to start investigating Katsuki’s case. So there was someone else stationed at the teppan—as scheduled.

Ryouji wasn’t yet on the verge of wrecking the kitchen in a blind rage, but judging by the way people were keeping their distance, the anger emanating from him as he silently seethed and scrubbed was palpable. Ryouji was grateful for the space; he suspected he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from lashing out if someone said the wrong thing.

He was well aware that he’d make a fool of himself if he broke a plate or two after showing up with a less-than-careful attitude. Even so, he’d come in so he could cool off before seeing Misato. If he’d gone home as planned, he probably would’ve run into Misato as soon as the guy got off work. Ryouji had considered going for a drink somewhere but was way too on edge to hang out in public places in such a small town.

So he fired off a quick text to let Misato know he’d been “Called in for an emergency shift at work,” then sequestered himself in the bar kitchen.

“Wassup, Ryou? You seem *suuuper* unsettled,” called a cheerful woman’s voice from behind him with a chuckle. Whereas most would go out of their way to avoid an obviously irritated thug, she was one of a tough few who appeared unphased.

“Had to deal with a freakin’ *awful* client today,” he answered frankly.

The majority of the staff at the bar were aware of Ryouji’s main profession; he didn’t try to hide it or anything. The courageous young woman who’d greeted him was named Tsugawa, and she was one of the people who knew about his line of work. She was a couple of years older than him with two kids and had

come back to Tomoe to live with her parents around the same time Ryouji started working at the bar.

“Oh, I *totally* get whatcha mean. It’s a pain in the ass! Just the other day, a customer...”

Ryouji quickly tuned her out, mm-hmming and aahing at the appropriate moments. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out that she was the type who liked to *talk* and *talk* until—eventually satisfied—she moved onto something else.

“...and he was a real disturbed kinda guy! Creepy, if yeh ask me. I was *sooo* relieved when he finally left, and, like...”

Her words took Ryouji by surprise and stabbed at the fresh wounds in his heart. He froze in place. Water continued to gush out of the faucet only to be sucked right down the drain.

After a few seconds, Tsugawa noticed his strange posture and trailed off. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

A slight cracking noise came from the plate in Ryouji’s hand. He almost unleashed his fury on Tsugawa but managed to stop himself in time.

Quit it. She’s talking about a complete stranger, remember? It’s none of your business.

“I just remembered somethin’ rude that client said, is all. He was spoutin’ all sortsa garbage about a buddy of mine,” Ryouji grumbled.

“What?! *Seriously?! Ew*, what a nasty piece of work!” huffed Tsugawa sympathetically. “Actually, that reminds me of this one time...”

She prattled on, but all he could hear was Wakatake’s accusations from earlier echoing in his mind: “*Disturbed*”? “*Attempted abduction*”? “*A blight on the Narukamis*”? *What a load of crap.*

Worse, the dude had even gone so far as to claim that poisoning and torturing Misato with a hungry snake spirit was *necessary* and the outcome *good* for the clan. “*Desperate times call for desperate measures*,” *my ass. Who does he think he is?*

PLINK. The plate Ryouji was gripping finally met its fate. It had broken cleanly in two.

“No way...” he heard Tsugawa comment quietly.

Ryouji was sure that Wakatake had never stopped to consider how such an unthinkable attack had affected Misato. After a certain point, Misato had become able to reference the existence of the

snake spirit with an awkward half-smile, but he must have been through a hell of a lot to achieve that much. And Ryouji still didn't know the full story. He remembered, though, how Misato had bashfully admitted to him that he'd never been able to casually mention Shirota in conversation before meeting Ryouji. He'd been smiling when he said that.

Someone in Misato's family had tried to kill him for no reason, and when he managed to survive against all odds, he'd lost somewhere to call home. And Wakatake *dared* to say it was a "beneficial outcome" that Misato had no choice but to leave his entire identity behind along with his most treasured family and friends.

I'm gonna wreck that bastard!

Ryouji had no intention of letting Misato know the extent of Wakatake's vitriolic opinion toward him. However, he at least wanted to cool his head enough to calmly give Misato a short summary of the conversation.

He wordlessly cleaned up the shards of broken (well, *snapped*) plate, gritting his teeth all the while.

"Hmm," Tsugawa murmured as she moved to finish washing the dirty dishes that Ryouji had abandoned. "It's kinda weird for yeh to be like this. I'm actually pretty surprised that yeh'd get *this* heated over someone, Ryou... Oh, *oh!* Wait—are yeh *dating* 'im?" She punctuated her question with an echoing, carefree cackle.

"Shhh! Couldn't ya quiet it down a bit?" a disgruntled voice called from the other side of the kitchen.

On the contrary, Ryouji was grateful for her loud disposition; it allowed him to relax. He didn't mind Tsugawa at all. She was the sort of person who never overthought things, immediately said whatever came to mind, and wore her emotions openly. It made it very easy for Ryouji to trust her.

"Nah, nah. He's just a friend," Ryouji replied.

"Oh, right. Hang on—are yeh talking about that one guy? The one with the long hair and works at Town Hall?" she recalled, wagging her finger up and down. "Aren't yeh both living together? Awww, I'm so jel. I wish I had a bestie like that!"

To his knowledge, Ryouji had never once called someone his "best friend." He'd spent most of his life getting by with superficial bonds alone—the kind that were purely insurance that someone had your back in the midst of a motley crowd. Ryouji had been saved by

others plenty of times, yet he couldn't say he'd ever truly connected with someone or formed a genuine bond with them—not even with his adoptive father. As for Misato, he'd only known the guy for less than a year.

"Girls' friendships are fragile, y'see. As soon as a guy gets involved, the friendship is as short-lived as a piece of wet toilet paper," Tsugawa sighed. "Ugh, I sure hope I get reincarnated as a guy. I wanna have that *bromance*!"

"Ya kiddin'? That stuff's got nothin' to do with gender. *All* friendships are like toilet paper once romance gets in the way," Ryouji countered. "It's just..." They were both living in that same ghostly, gloomy place; that was all. They gazed at the same distant sky from their dim position in existence, the darkness unchanging whether twilight fell or dawn arrived. It was comforting to be with someone who was just like him. "It just...pisses me off that he kept trash-talking someone I actually like," he mumbled with a pout.

"Heeey, Ryou!" The sound of his manager's guttural voice interrupted him, issuing from behind. "Mimi's here to see ya, so get the hell outta here! We've already got enough people in the back!"

"Mimi" was the nickname that the manager had given Misato.

Ryouji slapped a hand to his forehead. The manager's voice was loud enough to fill the entire bar, meaning there was no hiding his little lie about the place being short-staffed that night. He hadn't bothered to explain to his boss why he was doing the extra shift—the man wasn't exactly the understanding sort—and he regretted it. "Damn him," Ryouji muttered bitterly.

"Want me to go out there instead?" Tsugawa offered, having drawn her own conclusions as to why he was so tense about seeing Misato.

"Nah, s'all right. I've actually calmed down a lot since ya heard me out," he replied. In truth, she'd hardly heard the half of it, yet just being able to talk about it out loud had made a difference. Tsugawa was loud and blunt, but she wasn't at all bad like people seemed to believe. Ryouji casually waved to her before untying his apron. Emerging from the kitchen, Ryouji spotted Misato sitting idly at his usual spot in front of the teppan.

Misato raised his head when he caught sight of Ryouji, then lowered his gaze awkwardly. "Ryouji!" he called out, his tone slightly panicked. "Sorry, I...I just... I was too antsy to wait at home, so..."

They hadn't made any sort of arrangement to convene and talk it over. However, Ryouji had no doubt that Misato had been anticipating a lowdown of his meeting with Wakatake. His lodger didn't usually track him down at work when they had something to discuss though. While Misato was a very caring, attentive guy, he tended to be subtle about it.

There's no escaping it this time, huh?

Misato peered at Ryouji in furtive glances, smiling uncomfortably. He noted the dark circles etched beneath Ryouji's eyes; anyone could see that the man was looking rough.

"Ah, yeah. I needed to calm down a bit, too," Ryouji said vaguely. "Wait there a sec. I'll just tell everyone I'm leavin'."

"Huh? But—"

"It's fine," he said with a swipe of his hand. "Is your car still in the parking lot?"

The town hall employee lot was about a five-minute walk from both the main office building and the bar. Misato nodded. Evidently, he'd come straight to the bar from work.

"Let's just take my car, then. I'll drop ya back at the parking lot tomorrow." Ryouji had a feeling it would be easier to talk about his afternoon while driving. He wouldn't have to meet Misato's eyes.

Misato hopped down from the bar stool as instructed while Ryouji stopped by the locker room to stamp his timesheet. They left the building with casual waves to the staff.

SPARKS illuminated the interior of the dark car as Ryouji flicked his lighter with a *chk*. The sound of the window rolling down was soon accompanied by the grinding of the tires against asphalt and the howling of the cold wind as it whooshed into the vehicle. He'd only just switched the engine on, so the fans that were supposed to blow warm air into the cab hadn't heated up yet. Misato shivered in the December chill.

Tobacco smoke lingered in the air. Ryouji gripped the steering wheel with his left hand and flicked ash out the window with his right. Vermillion embers flickered close to his lips as he sucked in a breath. Misato idly watched him from the passenger seat, eyes

naturally following his movements. Though Ryouji smoked regularly, Misato had never considered him a heavy smoker. But that day, he lit a cigarette as soon as they left the bar. Then immediately reached for another as soon as they got into the car. He was clearly pretty stressed out. Although the habit slightly repulsed Misato, he decided to spare Ryouji his complaints that particular evening.

Ryouji was probably worried about Misato's...about Katsuki Narukami. Misato's gaze fell to his hands in his lap as he attempted to stifle both the urge to press Ryouji for information and the guilt roiling within him.

Since it was well past rush hour on a weeknight, the prefectural road they traveled was almost empty aside from the occasional passing car. Ryouji usually kept the radio on at all times, but that was dead silent, too. The purr of the powerful engine seemed to vibrate through Misato's entire body as the sedan trundled along. Ryouji drove away from downtown and crossed a bridge before turning left at the traffic light. The street followed the river as it skirted the town center on the opposite bank, then joined with the national highway. The light of the townscape was noticeably muted as they sped past the orange-tinged lamps that lined the road at regular intervals.

The first time Misato ever set eyes on Katsuki Narukami, he thought the boy a nervous, fussy child. Katsuki was only three years old at the time, and Misato still remembered the way he'd hesitated when presented with the gloomy-faced toddler.

"Mimi... Be a good big brother to little Katsuki, okay?" Misato's mother, Akemi, had told him while gently stroking his hair. It was a few days after he'd been thrust into that new world completely different from the one he was used to. Several other adults had been there, and Misato didn't recall seeing even a hint of softness or warmth in any of their gazes.

"So...I spoke to that Wakatake fella today," Ryouji began with a murmur.

That was all Misato needed to surmise that it hadn't been a pleasant meeting. "I know. What did he say?" Misato prompted.

"He said...your little brother, Katsuki Narukami, is missing. Sounds like he ran away from home. Got on a bus then followed a nawame branchin' out from the mountain near Izumo Grand Shrine."

“A nawame...” Misato echoed in a whisper. It was an extremely reckless getaway method, and Katsuki’s ability to use it at all was likely the result of the skills he’d honed as the next head of the Narukami family. Misato’s stomach clenched uncomfortably. Though he’d barely been able to choke down any lunch, he still didn’t feel hungry.

“When was this?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“‘Bout five days ago. Though if he’s lost in a nawame, time might be passin’ differently for him,” Ryouji noted. People who’d experienced being spirited away often claimed that they’d been gone for a different amount of time than that of the world of the living—just like Urashima Tarou, the protagonist of a Japanese fairytale who visited an underwater palace for what seemed a few days only to return to find that a hundred years had passed.

“I really hope so...” Misato replied glumly. It was December; even one night in the alpine cold could be perilous.

“The Narukamis can’t find him, so I’m sure that’s what’s happened.”

“Did Wakatake say anything about why he might’ve left?”

“Nah, not really...” Ryouji had scornfully wrinkled his nose when he answered, Misato observed.

Misato started to ask if he was sure, and Ryouji shot him a silvery-green glare over the top of his sunglasses. His tengu eyes were permeated with more silver than usual and seemed to glow softly in the darkness. Misato had come to learn that those mystical eyes appeared more green than silver whenever Ryouji experienced strong emotion—not that Ryouji had ever actually told him as much.

“Anyway, I said I’d take the job. He’ll probably send an email soon with more details,” Ryouji said bluntly, his curt tone in stark juxtaposition to his luminous eyes.

“Okay,” Misato replied quietly.

A short silence followed.

“Ughhhh...” Ryouji groaned, emptying his lungs with a gruff sigh. He continued in a low, gravelly voice, as though he couldn’t stand to hold back any longer, “Seriously, that Wakatake bastard really grinds my gears. The Narukami family sure employs some uptight sorts in that grand old house of theirs.”

Misato couldn’t help but laugh in response to his candid distaste for the man. “Yeah, he’s... Well. I think you put it pretty

nicely.” Despite the fact that Wakatake wasn’t all that old, he was insufferably inflexible. He wasn’t exactly anyone’s idea of a good conversation partner. “Ever since I first met him... He must’ve been in his early twenties back then. But even then, I don’t think he was very pleasant.”

“Pfft, hah!” Ryouji uttered an amused bark of a laugh.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Misato mumbled.

“Hey—you’re not the one who should be apologizin’.”

“I know, but...” He still found it hard to shake the sense of responsibility he felt for his fellow clan members.

Ryouji narrowed his eyes at him, unimpressed. “Ya do realize you’re just another random person they decided unload their crap on, right?” he said with a cynical smile. “Those jerks,” he added venomously. His words were colored with genuine anger.

Sounds like they really didn’t see eye-to-eye.

Misato was just about to apologize again, then snapped his mouth shut. Misato was a *Miyazawa*, after all. Even so, Katsuki... His brother wasn’t.

Misato was eight years old when he first met Katsuki. He’d been too young to really understand what was going on but had nonetheless picked up on the strange energy in the air. His mother had stood next to him, and behind the tiny, wary child had been another woman in beautiful Japanese clothing. Misato and the young boy were brothers with the same father but two entirely different mothers.

Oh. I’m taking this little kid’s dad away from him, Misato had realized. Suddenly, it had made sense that he felt so disquieted when faced with the cautious, solitary kid in the midst of a group of adults in that large, dim Japanese-style room. He’d spent his eight years innocently believing in a faceless father he’d never met and had genuinely rejoiced upon receiving a birthday present from the man for the first time a year prior. Meanwhile, Misato’s toddler of a brother had been living with both of his parents but acted like he was a stray cat. Their familial priorities were pretty backward.

“But Katsuki’s still my brother,” Misato reiterated. “If he’s still missing, I want to help find him. What exactly did Wakatake say? Is Katsuki somewhere around Tomoe?”

An intelligent child, Misato had quickly come to understand that “Katsuki’s older brother” was the only position the Narukami clan would ever afford him.

"Might be. They've got a rough idea of the area, so they're carryin' out searches all over northern Hiroshima, mainly in places where nawame are more likely to form."

"All right. I'll try to—"

"Don'tcha dare. You've got your own work to do, Mr. Civil Servant," Ryouji snapped immediately. Misato's shoulders slumped. "If ya spend time at the office workin' on this, that's abusin' your position, y'know? Remember that you're a *public* employee. I ain't payin' taxes for you to shirk your duties for personal troubles, so—" He proceeded to harangue Misato with more criticism along those lines, but by the end of his rant it was clear that he did so out of concern for his friend. "...Just hold on for the next coupla days, aight?" concluded Ryouji with a reluctant sigh. "You can come along with me on the weekend."

Misato couldn't restrain a huff of laughter as Ryouji crushed his cigarette into the ashtray.

"What?" Ryouji asked with a pointed look, the silver piercings in his left ear sparkling as he turned his head.

"Oh, no. I was just thinking that you have a good heart." *Even if he looks like a complete thug.*

"Tch." Ryouji scratched his bleached hair awkwardly, almost as if he'd heard what Misato had opted to leave unsaid. He rolled the window back up with a jab of a button, and the car fell silent once more. Heated air flowed around their ankles. Ryouji placed his right hand on the steering wheel, yet it was only a matter of seconds before he reached for the carton in his breast pocket again.

"You're sure smoking a lot today." Misato had reacted aloud without really thinking. "Was talking to Wakatake really that terrible?" He noticed that the brand of cigarettes was different from the ones Ryouji normally liked to smoke, too. The car's ashtray was already full of the usual cigarette butts, so he'd probably finished a pack during the day and bought another carton at the closest shop.

"For sure. It's impossible to get through to that guy," Ryouji groused. His hand stilled over his breast pocket, then begrudgingly returned to the steering wheel, evidently dissuaded by Misato's words. Instead, he tapped his forefinger against the leather-covered wheel in irritation.

"It's because he never considers other people," Misato agreed—the exact type of person that Ryouji hated. The temperature in the cab seemed to drop in the wake of his quick response; Ryouji

even stopped tapping his finger.

A pedestrian crossing sign flickered green in the distance. After a while, it morphed to red, and the traffic light at the oncoming intersection changed to amber. Ryouji eased off the accelerator, and the car gradually slowed.

“Whaddya mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. He doesn’t see the person in front of him as an individual with their own will,” Misato explained. “Katsuki is just the ‘next head of the Narukami clan,’ while you’re probably just a ‘local freelance psychic’ or ‘a thug.’ It’s like he can only recognize people by their job title or the superficial label he slaps on them.”

“Oof! That’s harsh,” Ryouji said with a thoroughly amused cackle.

The car had cruised forward on momentum alone until Ryouji gently pushed on the brake pedal just as they arrived at the red lights, bringing the car to a tidy stop. His car seemed to glide along the streets with nary a protest and was noiseless when it braked, too.

“That’s just the conclusion I came to after spending so many years in the same house as him. He’s only interested in whether other people are successfully carrying out their specified roles... Like, he has no concept of people outside of that,” Misato said. “Right now he probably just sees Katsuki as a handful. I bet he hasn’t given any thought to why he might have run away.”

It was possible Wakatake had gone through life being judged in the same way, which may have caused him to adopt a narrow way of thinking as well. Misato had devised that theory only after meeting such a huge variety of people in college and at work. But, even if that was the case, as Katsuki’s tutor, Wakatake was *supposed* to be someone the boy could trust—especially because Wakatake was the only person routinely around Katsuki. Naturally a whole range of problems resulted when he didn’t view Katsuki as an autonomous person.

I used to think that made things easier for us, but...looking back on it now, I wish things had been different for him. His gut stung with regret and self-hatred.

“Wish I’d never done it,” he mumbled quietly.

“Huh?” Ryouji leaned toward him, urging Misato to repeat himself.

When they were little, Katsuki warmed up to Misato extremely

quickly—to the point where he often threw a tantrum if they were apart for even a short while. He must have been so lonely before Misato arrived.

Misato kept him company without a single complaint. He dedicated all the time that he wasn't busy with his new training or schoolwork to Katsuki. The way Katsuki trusted him and constantly sought his attention was endearing, and it wasn't long before Misato began to cherish his role as a big brother. He genuinely wanted to protect the kid.

Misato had planned his life around clinging to that role; he was well aware of that. So long as he could remain Katsuki's brother—so long as Katsuki needed him—he had somewhere to belong in the clan, guaranteed.

At times, he looked back on his actions as an eight-year-old and was surprised by how insightful and crafty he'd been. He'd most certainly chosen to dedicate his life to being the elder brother as a result of calculating his own personal gain in doing so. At first it was part of a performance that he felt obligated to put on for the adults around them. Then, after a few years passed and he developed the capacity to understand the adults' respective situations, he realized that continuing to make Katsuki depend on him was the only way for him to survive in the Narukami family.

"It's nothing," he finally replied. His past was so hazy that it felt like a past life in a different universe. But even if Misato's childhood was all just a bad dream, Katsuki still had to endure that stifling, heavy environment. Deep within his heart, Misato endlessly hoped that his stupid attempt at self-preservation hadn't left too deep an impact on Katsuki's quality of life.

I abandoned him and never looked back. I wish...I wish he'd just forget about me. I hope he meets new people, makes close friends... I wish... His distant, selfish prayer had most likely never come true. If Misato could glean anything from Katsuki's foolhardy flight from home, it was that.

He had always looked the other way and told himself that there was no point in feeling guilty over something he couldn't rectify. He had told himself that he could never go back to the Narukamis.

The traffic signal turned green, and the car quietly sped forward again.

Fortunately, Ryouji seemed to have cheered up for whatever

reason. After a little more silence, he turned on the radio, and fuzzy voices filtered out of the speakers. An enthusiastic DJ was humorously responding to a middle schooler's plea for advice, and between the talk of love and school clubs and friendship, a Christmas song cut in.

"Ugh, you're *kiddin'*," Ryouji groaned. "I can't deal with this time of year. Christmas, Valentine's Day... S'not like either of them apply to me. Valentine's is for people who have their lives together, and what the hell does Christmas have to do with me as a Buddhist? Lame," he pronounced, quickly reaching forward to change the station. He was a Shugendo monk, after all, and a practitioner of ritual Buddhism—although he wasn't perfect by any means.

In Misato's case, since the Narukamis typically worshipped the spirit of their godly ancestor at a Shintoist shrine, he didn't celebrate Christmas either. And his colleagues in the Abnormal Disaster Unit, such as Tsujimoto and Ookubo, also came from Buddhist or Shintoist backgrounds one way or another. Due to the pervasive nature of the holiday season, however, those in the office who had children often puzzled over how to handle Christmas in their household. The way they had animatedly discussed the issue over tea and snacks earlier that afternoon felt like a distant memory to Misato.

The next station was airing a piece of classical music often heard at that time of year. It was played on a piano and its composer was Bach, but Misato didn't know the actual title of the piece. The dull melody overcame him in a sudden wave of fatigue.

"This music...makes me really sleepy..." Misato murmured. He'd hardly slept the night before, so the combination of the car's movement and the low piano notes was the perfect recipe to lull him to sleep like a baby in a cradle.

"Sleep 'til we get home, yeah?" resounded Ryouji's voice softly in his head.

KONOMI Sugihara woke with an uneasy, creeping feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her young son slept next to her, and her husband next to him.

"Again...?" she said in a hushed sigh, before soundlessly

slipping out of bed so as to not rouse Haruto.

The ointment isn't working...

She headed for the bathroom and ducked into the changing room. Lifting her pajamas up, she pushed her underwear out of the way. Exactly halfway down her torso, just above her belly button, a bright scarlet rash looped around her midriff like a belt. She retrieved the tube of ointment from the basket in front of her and proceeded to slather it over the painful skin. The doctor had told her that the rash probably arose from a mixture of stress and dryness, so he'd prescribed her some moisturizing cream. It had been about two weeks since then; the tube was almost empty, and the rash hadn't improved at all.

In fact, I think it's actually getting worse. The affected area was spreading, each spot swelling bigger and bigger until almost maroon.

Konomi shivered uncomfortably and quickly straightened her clothes. It was nighttime in December. If she stood around half naked for too long, her immune system would suffer.

A small, artificial Christmas tree lit the dark living room. Haruto had begged them for it the year before. Together they'd assembled and decorated it. Konomi was wholeheartedly relieved that they could go about their daily lives as normal once more. Ever since the day the long-haired man from Town Hall showed up at their house, Haruto's strange wanderlust had disappeared just as quickly as it had manifested.

The circumstances surrounding his behavior were confusing and complex, and the problem had been resolved without her ever really understanding what had happened. But that man from the town hall had assured her it would be okay, and since then, it really had been. The only issue that yet persisted was Konomi's shaky body, still vulnerable from all the stress.

Guess this is what happens when you hit your thirties... I can't even remember how being fully healthy feels. Maybe I'm just getting old...but who knows?

The fatigue and sense of heaviness were worse at night. She experienced low-grade fevers on a regular basis and often couldn't even bring herself to make dinner. Her husband was concerned and had been helping look after Haruto and the chores, but unfortunately he was away at work for eight hours a day—plus the hour and a half of travel to and from Hiroshima City. In total, he

was gone for over ten hours each weekday and therefore wasn't always there when she needed him.

Maybe I should quit my part-time job completely. But...

She had a lot to worry about, but the worst of it was over. All she had to do was keep warm and allow herself time to recover.

With a yawn, Konomi crawled back into bed.

MISATO ventured into the courtyard in front of the outbuilding and looked up at the clear night sky. The Karino estate lay far from the light pollution of town, so the stars twinkled prominently in the sky. In summertime, the Milky Way shone brilliantly across the heavens. During the winter, though, Misato could name only Orion out of the constellations he saw.

A white cloud of his breath drifted into the air above him. The lamps hanging from the eaves illuminated the vapor as it dissipated, infusing it with a slight amber glow. Although the moon was absent, the starry sky was a gorgeous sight to behold.

It was already deep into the hours of the night, yet his night-owl landlord appeared to still be up. And after falling asleep in Ryouji's car and having some dinner, Misato was feeling wide-awake.

He peered at his phone. His eyes had already adjusted to the dark, so the white light of the liquid crystal display blinded him somewhat. A phone number stood out on the bright screen. It was the number his father gave him when he abruptly announced that he was applying to a different university and leaving the Narukami family. In the end, Misato had simply told his father that he could "never come back again," leaving out any mention of the strife and pain he'd experienced up to that point.

His father—the head of the Narukami clan, rather—had consented. He didn't try to stop Misato but didn't encourage him either. He merely bowed his head and asked that Misato give him—and only him—a number at which Misato could be reached if necessary. He'd emphasized that he would never share the number with another soul, so he was likely aware of what had happened to Misato and what Misato wanted in life. He'd not once tried to contact Misato since.

It wasn't as though Misato never wished that his father had broken down in tears and apologized to and comforted him. But even if his father had cried and told him something like "I'll never let anything like this happen to you again," he probably would have brushed the promise off and left all the same. That was just how fed up he'd been with the Narukamis by that point.

His father did offer him one word of apology. There was no acknowledgement of their relationship as father and son, his position of responsibility in the household, or even what exactly he regretted. It was one word; one, single word: "Sorry."

That solitary, unadorned "Sorry" only depressed Misato further.

Aside from that word, his father's quaking shoulders, strained tone of voice, and whitening knuckles told him everything else he needed to know. So Misato supplied a simple reply of his own in return: "It's fine." Then he jotted down the number his father provided, and that was that. His father was never one for talking, and Misato had no doubt that he'd meant what he said about being sorry or sharing his information.

Misato switched to a new phone number after leaving home, sent a text to his father from the new number...and that was the last time either of them contacted the other. He hadn't even alerted his father to his new address or where he'd ended up working. And he'd only found out recently from Tsujimoto and Ryouji that the family had publicly branded him as "untraceable." That was a sign that his father not only accepted that the scandal had happened but was also trying to protect Misato from the fallout.

Misato tapped on the number, opening their message history. Only two messages popped up on the screen: the text he'd sent to inform his father of his new number and the man's response.

I want to ask him about Katsuki. That was the only reason his resolution to never contact his father again was wavering. He'd been deliberating whether to make the call since the day before. *It's not like I'm in any position to ask, though.* As Ryouji had pointed out, Misato had become just another random person unrelated to the Narukami family. In fact, not even his birth certificate listed the head of the Narukami clan as his father. After he cut himself off from the family, there was effectively nothing left connecting him to the Narukamis.

After a little more thought, Misato realized that contacting his

father at this point made no sense. He gave up, locking his phone before looking up at the starry sky again. He spotted Orion, the only constellation he recognized. He had no idea where to find Sirius or the Pleiades. Katsuki, who loved the stars, could point out the Winter Triangle and the Winter Hexagon and all sorts of other such asterisms. Misato remembered having been fervently schooled on constellations in the past but had forgotten almost all of them.

I was good with flowers, but I've always been hopeless with constellations.

He fondly recalled the days he spent nosing through plant encyclopedias so he could answer Katsuki's frequent query of "What's that called?" when they went on walks together. He'd even memorized the seasonal epithets that haiku poets used for each plant, so perhaps he simply had a natural affinity for flora.

Each winter, Katsuki hoped for a glimpse of the Winter Hexagon, while summer was all about meteor showers. An elementary schooler who always wanted to go outside at night was quite a handful. Wakatake never indulged Katsuki's requests; he wanted Katsuki to act more like the next head of the family. Therefore, Misato was the only one Katsuki kept pestering to take him out on nighttime adventures.

They didn't have to go far to see the Winter Hexagon. The summer meteor showers, however, were difficult to watch because a mountain obscured the southeastern sky from where the Narukami estate was located on the coast. The only way to witness them was by taking a bus out of the mountains to flatter ground.

Sounds like he remembered how to take the bus, then. Maybe he even took the same route from the same stop... But where was he heading this time? All by himself?

There was only one bus stop a walkable distance from the Narukami estate. That the day they'd taken the bus together was still etched so strongly in Katsuki's memory made Misato feel simultaneously guilty and a tiny bit happy.

That was the day I...

Misato had already known by then that he had no recorded father and that his real surname was Miyazawa. His birth mother had left the Narukami household very suddenly around three months prior, abandoning Misato.

The best time to see the meteor shower was in the dead of night. There were no buses to take them home again until morning.

Misato was well aware of that fact; he'd checked all the bus and train timetables over and over again.

Yet, he'd clasped Katsuki's hand and helped him clamber aboard the bus all the same.

Chapter 6: Yasaka Shrine

NAGASO Yasaka Shrine sat at the foot of Mount Kagura on a bluff that overlooked the rest of the village. Three or four steep stone steps led up to the shrine from the Nagaso District Community Center. Aside from those stairs, the site had no other landmarks to speak of, nothing more than a lone, modest building. The community center and village plaza were believed to have been built on what was once its grounds, so in the present day, there were scarcely any locations of significance for shrine-goers to visit. It didn't even boast the small grove present at many other shrines, although retaining walls circled the structure to protect it from landslides.

In fact, it looked more like a large *hokora*—a tiny, miniature shrine dedicated to lesser gods—than a full-scale shrine in its own right. Yasaka Shrine's purpose was to house an evil-repelling, good-harvest-inviting deity, and according to religious accounts, both the gods of Daisen and of Gion were enshrined there. The Daisen deity was said to safeguard horses and cattle, while the god of Gion was a plague-bringer worshipped by a cult that hoped to engender divine appeasement. Because the Gion cult was near exclusive to the Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto, the name "Yasaka" indicated that Nagaso Yasaka Shrine was *also* a place of recovery and defense against misfortune.

"So...does that mean Nagaso Yasaka Shrine is only *said* to house a god of harvest?" Misato asked, clambering up a narrow incline behind a row of residences. He'd driven there with Ookubo in one of Town Hall's cars.

It was conspicuously strange that the shrine shared a name with one frequented by the plague-quelling Gion cult given that its existence was ostensibly to promote abundant harvests; the two didn't seem related.

"Hard to say," Ookubo hummed with a nod. "The god of Daisen is a patron deity of farmin', horses, and cattle...and the shrine was allegedly erected during a famine, righ'? Not to mention,

the people o' Nagaso used to dedicate human sacrifices to Mount Kagura as a way to prevent famine. Seein' how much this stuff has to do with famine makes yeh think it wouldn't be at all weird to have a harvest god enshrined in the area."

Misato nodded. Ookubo was right: it made sense that a place where a young casualty of famine had been deified had become a source of prosperity for farmers. But if that was the case...where had the "Yasaka" part come from?

Misato was tagging along with Ookubo—a Shintoist—to identify the item of worship believed to contain the deities' spirits at the heart of Nagaso Yasaka Shrine. They'd planned to meet Tagami, Hirose's maternal grandfather, at the community center.

"But its name would suggest that the shrine is supposed to ward off infectious diseases, too," Misato noted. "And the plague god that the cultists want to placate supposedly dwells in Mount Kagura. Perhaps it's one of the human sacrifices that was offered there?"

With all the information they'd gathered thus far, they could hypothesize that the real reason eating adzuki beans was considered taboo—and even curse worthy—was hidden somewhere among all the different, branching stories concerning the beans. First, that of the origins of Nagaso Yasaka Shrine. Then there was the tale of the tag curse passed down at Tomoe Elementary School. And finally, there was the legend of the azukiarai.

If they assumed that the story of the azukiarai's curse was the link between the founding of Yasaka Shrine and its focus on illness, they could possibly find out more about the true identity of what was actually causing that curse. What had ended up in folklore as an "azukiarai" may actually have been one of the human sacrifice victims, as Misato had suggested.

Although ritual human sacrifice was no longer allowed due to changes in ethical perspectives over the generations, it did serve a genuine, religious purpose. Sacrifices constituted high-value offerings to malevolent gods. Additionally, sacrificial victims went on to become gods themselves, which enabled them to manage the spiritual energy of the mountain and bless their old village with fortune. In other words, so long as the ritual succeeded, there was no chance that the victim might decide to curse people. Therefore, it shouldn't have been necessary to construct an entirely new shrine to honor a sacrificial victim's spirit when Kagura Shrine already

existed directly up the slope.

Misato had been told to report to the unit manager, Yoshida, first thing that morning. Yoshida had informed him that the Sugihara household was in imminent danger and that the emergency was related to Mount Kagura yet again.

“Miyazawa, could you give Mrs. Sugihara another call? As soon as possible, please. It’s about the same thing, really; it’s possible Mr. and Mrs. Sugihara themselves are suffering some effects from the adzuki bean case,” he’d said. “The folktale concerning what happens to people who eat adzuki beans in Nagaso was passed down only by word of mouth between villagers, y’know? Now that we know the tag story is true, it’s highly likely adults will suffer ill effects from eating the beans, too—like in the curse of the azukiarai.

“Of course, the Sugiharas had no idea about the adzuki bean taboo, and unless either of them don’t like ’em, I reckon they ate those red bean mochi that Haruto brought home from school. So could you ask Mrs. Sugihara how they’re doing? I’ll get ahold of the dermatology department at the central hospital, so if anything seems wrong, have her see a doctor there.”

Misato had immediately called Sugihara as instructed. As feared, she’d described a painful, itchy rash accompanied by a low-grade fever. She said she had actually scheduled an appointment at a local clinic for that morning and so had already taken the morning off work. Misato asked her to request the entire day and to come to town hall instead so they could have her examined at the central hospital later that afternoon. She was quick to agree to his plan, and Misato handed her case over to Tsujimoto and Asaka while he investigated Yasaka Shrine with Ookubo.

They intended to enter the inner sanctuary of Yasaka Shrine and confirm the form of its sacred vessel once they rendezvoused with Tagami; he was in charge of the keys. No full-time priests worked at the shrine, so on national holidays, the chief priest from another, nearby shrine traveled to Nagaso to recite the prayers. The villagers took turns as the shrine’s caretaker, and Tagami was the one fulfilling the role at the moment. Even he had never laid eyes on the sacrosanct object at the heart of the shrine, so he couldn’t tell them what it was.

Misato and Ookubo eventually arrived at the community center after a brief climb up a steep, narrow path toward the foot of

the mountain. It was a little past ten o'clock in the morning, and the mist that blanketed the Tomoe Basin was beginning to morph into a sporadic drizzle of raindrops. Rain was forecast for that afternoon, yet the clouds were so dense that Misato doubted it would hold off for that long.

They spotted the silhouette of a man wearing a quilted puffer jacket sheltering under the eaves of the community center. Hearing Misato and Ookubo approach, he stepped out into the plaza to welcome them. Sure enough, it was Tagami. His thinning white hair had been neatly smoothed down, and his black, tailored coat complemented his subdued slacks and shoes. A very well-dressed gentleman, he obviously took care of his appearance. He was almost eighty, but his tall posture and sturdy physique most definitely didn't show it. After a proper look at him, Misato could see just how closely his brow resembled Hirose's.

"Good morning. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us," Misato said politely as he and Ookubo bowed their heads.

"Oh, no—it's my pleasure," Tagami insisted, bowing in return.

It wasn't the first time the three of them had met. Misato, of course, had encountered him while researching Haruto's case, and Ookubo was acquainted with Tagami through his work as chief priest in a neighboring jurisdiction in Tomoe District.

They ascended toward the shrine while engaging in casual small talk about the weather and end-of-year festivities, and soon Tagami was unlocking the shrine building for them. Ookubo made sure to cast a barrier around the premises before they ventured in, "Just in case."

"Let's just hope the rain doesn't turn into snow," Ookubo said with a sigh.

Tagami nodded in agreement. "It shouldn't snow before the end of the year, but I reckon I gotta get my tires changed sooner or later."

"I betcha changed yer tires already, right, Miyazawa? It's even colder 'round where yeh live," Ookubo said with a hint of realization.

"Oh, yes." Misato nodded. "I bought some last week and had them changed right then and there. I hear the mountain roads in the area can be particularly dangerous, so..."

It was impossible to navigate the region without winter tires. The border between northern Hiroshima and Shimane Prefecture

was home to several ski slopes, and the snow could pile up as high as three or four feet in some locations. The conditions weren't quite so bad in central Tomoe, but apparently it wasn't unusual to have to drive on compacted snow at times. The trek from the Karino estate to urban Tomoe involved traversing a mountain ridge that was infamous for perilous blockages and icy road surfaces.

Unfortunately, the tires had been expensive. Misato figured that cutting costs by buying cheaper, studless winter tires would be putting the cart before the horse, so he'd forked out a considerable sum for his own safety. Thankfully, his benevolent landlord had said Misato could wait until his winter bonus came in to pay rent that month.

Tagami opened the door to the shrine and they took their shoes off before heading inside. The space was darker than even the overcast outdoors due to firmly anchored storm shutters, yet Tagami handily reached for the light switch as though he were used to the murk. What lay before them was an unassuming, oblong room of about seventy-five square feet. A step demarcated the boundary between the outer visiting area and the inner sanctum, which boasted a small stand decorated with golden staves and laden with food and drink. It was just about visible through some bamboo blinds.

Misato, Ookubo, and Tagami lined themselves up in front of the sanctuary, placing their hands together in prayer before lifting the bamboo blinds to step inside. A rectangular wooden box rested on an altar at the very back. It was made of plain, worn wood, its lid secured with nails. It was about the length of a human child.

Oh boy... It really reminds me of a coffin.

The dim, faraway lightbulb cast a muted light over the vessel of the windowless shrine, seeming to engulf the air with an indescribable gloom. Snake scales brushed along the pit of Misato's stomach, and he pursed his lips and drew his eyebrows together in discomfort. That was the white snake spirit's alarm bell, in effect. It was different from the sensation Misato felt when there was a tasty, spiritual "snack" in the vicinity. No—rather, whatever presence was in the air was putting the snake in a bad mood.

Whatever it is, Shirota's really not pleased about it, huh? It's pretty dark outside right now, too...and it's cold. Gods, I hope Katsuki's okay. If he let his mind wander for even an instant, his thoughts immediately drifted to the safety of his brother. Although Misato

had managed to get a bit more sleep that night compared to the one before, he worried constantly about Katsuki's wellbeing.

Tagami used the tools he'd brought to pry the nails from the lid. The termite-devoured box shuddered in response, white particles of dust spraying across the top of the altar. The box appeared to be made of paulownia wood or the like, judging by how easily the lid came loose.

"I hear they used ta change out the whole box every seven years, but they've not been doing that since before I were a wee kid," Tagami recalled.

"Did yeh ever know why they did that?" Ookubo replied.

They were all bracing themselves for what might lie beneath that old, wooden lid.

Tagami shook his head in apology. "I was tryna remember that just the other day, but nothing really sticks out, gotta say..."

Ookubo nodded simply in reply before gesturing to Misato to grab the other side of the lid. "All righ'. Miyazawa...are yeh ready? When I say go..."

Misato bobbed his head sternly, anchoring the fingertips of both his hands along the edge.

"Go! Heave-ho!"

They strained, then pushed the lid off the box. Misato peered inside, gazing into the stagnant darkness at the bottom. Something round and bluish white came into sight as weak light stretched into the container's depths.

It was a face.

With wide eyes, Misato looked down the length of the box to see a cherubic young boy lying within. The boy wore surprisingly modern clothing, clad in what looked like an elementary schooler's polo shirt and black shorts.

It looks like a boy, but... I thought the murdered child they enshrined here was supposed to be a girl.

With a start, the boy's eyes snapped open. Misato stared, a strange, all-consuming sense of déjà vu overcoming him as he studied the child's pale, round cheeks and pretty facial features.

The boy's gaze shifted to meet Misato's. Then he spoke—in a clear, singsong voice yet unbroken... "Are you ready?"

Misato jumped out of his skin. That was when he realized.

Isn't that...me?!

The face that stared back at him had once belonged to Misato

as a young child. Within seconds of that revelation, the world around him suddenly vanished.

“ONE, twoooo, threee... Are you ready?”

“Not yet!” a young voice called in the distance.

Whenever the two of them played hide-and-seek tag, it was Misato’s responsibility as the older brother to be the demon.

“...Eighteen...nineteen...twenty! Are you ready?”

“Not yeeet!” the voice replied again, his response punctuated with far-off giggles and guffaws as though he couldn’t quite keep quiet. Katsuki never hid anywhere Misato couldn’t find him; he simply waited with not-so-bated breath to be discovered. “Not yeeet!” he shouted once more, even further away that time.

Misato abruptly realized that they were playing not in their usual spot on the vast Narukami estate but in the wilderness of the mountains. Misato pushed up from where he was lying facedown on a log to see that his arms were clothed in kimono sleeves, the shoddy fabric covered with patchwork. Blinking in confusion, he examined the rest of his body and noticed Japanese zori sandals wedged between his toes. He sat up and turned around. An expanse of wintry, desolate peaks stretched out before him, the ground matted with leaves and ashen-gray branches.

“...?” He tried to call Katsuki’s name, but a different name altogether spilled from his lips.

What’s happening? The question echoed in his head as if two people had spoken at once.

Why did you leave me?

How could you? I devoted my entire heart to you. You used to adore me.

I always put you first, played with you, gave you everything you could ever need...

“I mean, you were supposed to belong to me for the rest of my life.”

“—zawa! HEY, Miyazawa!”

Misato came to with a cold jolt. He could hear his heartbeat throbbing wildly in his ears. He gasped for air like a beached fish, his shoulders heaving with every rasping breath.

It had dragged him in.

Ookubo relinquished the tight grip he had on Misato's shoulders and loosed a huge, gruff sigh. "What's the matter with yeh? Get a hold of yehself," he said with an undercurrent of rebuke.

"Sorry..." Misato's vision seemed even dimmer than before. Darkness unbefitting midday suffused the entire building, as though the sun wasn't shining at all.

This is bad... Is it using me as a path to the living realm? He'd accidentally resonated with the spirit of the cursed entity that the people of Nagaso had been attempting to mollify for generations.

Misato looked into the casket. It contained a large, rotting straw effigy—presumably one of the effigies the villagers had presented in offering to Mount Kagura. The straw dummy was surrounded by a scattering of what looked to be old adzuki beans.

"It's...really dark in here, huh?" he said shakily, trying to cover up his panic.

In what seemed like a direct reply, the fluorescent lamp behind them began to flicker. Misato's pulse thrummed so intensely that it felt as if his very body was vibrating.

Bzzzzz...shwp. Bzzzzz...shwp. The lamp switched on and off with an obnoxious sound, the bulb buzzing unhealthily. Amid the irregular intervals of darkness, Misato glimpsed a shadow stirring within the box.

Fzzzfzzzfzzzfzzz...shwp. Fzzzfzzzfzzzfzzzfzzzfzzz...shwp.

With each blackout, the noise grew louder, gradually amplified by the darkness in the casket.

"Miyazawa," said Ookubo pointedly, catching Misato's eye.

Misato nodded. He put his hands together in a mudra to cast a purifying barrier. "*Om kili kili vajra vajri—*"

Fzzzfzzzfzzzfzzz! The shadow overflowed the wooden box in the form of hundreds of small, black rhinoceros beetles, the deafening hum of their wings filling the whole shrine.

"—bhura bandha bandha hum phat!"

With a *snap*, the building shivered, and silence finally returned.

"There's a barrier 'round the entire shrine, so if we just get outta here and shut the door, we can seal all these things inside. But

first... Tagami, help me close this,” Ookubo said, beckoning to the other man before grasping one end of the lid.

Closer inspection revealed several small pouches of adzuki beans bulging out of the old effigy’s stomach. Bugs had eaten away at the pouches, which was why so many of the beans littered the bottom of the casket.

While Ookubo and Tagami maneuvered the lid, Misato maintained his mudra, ensuring that the barrier he’d created was holding strong. He peered down at the “sacred” vessel again.

For a moment, the effigy disappeared beneath the shadow of the lid...

...and then those pale, round cheeks became visible in the darkness once more.

SLAM. The lid bounced up again the moment it was dropped. Ookubo and Tagami leaned forward in alarm, pressing it back down with their entire body weight.

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG!

Something was beating on the box from the *inside*. It punched and kicked, trying anything to force its way out of the casket. The two men bore down on it with all their might, but the lid jerked ever so slightly into the air. A dark miasma streamed through the gap.

“Miyazawa! Yeh got ’em sealing talismans I gave yeh, right? Slap one on!” yelled Ookubo in panic.

“Right!” Misato said, rummaging in his bag. “O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind—*kyuu kyuu nyo ritsu ryou!*” He tore the liner off the double-sided tape on the back of the paper and smacked the talisman onto the lid—and another on the box itself for good measure.

The violent banging and thumping instantly went silent. Misato plastered three more talismans on the casket just to make sure the sealing was in effect on all four sides. Double-sided tape was a modern addition to the ritual, and exorcists were divided as to whether it was revolutionary or foolish. As far as Misato knew, the tape had no effect on the success of the talismans.

“...Did we win?” hazarded Ookubo, straightening. He regarded the box warily. Tagami stepped a good distance back from it, a shaken expression on his face.

Fzzzfzzzfzzzfzzz.

A shadow in the corner of the shrine began to rapidly

proliferate as soon as Misato released his purification barrier. The rain that had started to mercilessly fall from the sky did nothing to help matters; the sound of large droplets battering the roof only added to the cacophonous drone of wings. With a *shwp*, the dim lightbulb winked out completely, and the shrine was plunged into blackness.

“The ones that escaped are still kickin’ around, huh?” Ookubo said, sucking on his teeth.

“I’m sorry...” Misato sighed. The lingering effects of the attack were preventing him from accessing his full power. When Ookubo didn’t reply, he clenched his fists. Misato had allowed the darkness to escape in the first place and yet couldn’t even exorcise it properly.

“We’ve still got some more stuff to check out in here. Miyazawa, could yeh exorcise those things?” Ookubo asked.

“Of course.”

The snake spirit inside him was struggling uncomfortably in his gut. The sensation differed somewhat from the apprehension he’d felt earlier, but he wasn’t exactly in a position to scrutinize the snake’s exact motions. *Cut it out! I have to do something right now, so I’ll hear you out later, okay?!* With a sharp intake of breath, Misato steeled himself, suppressing the agitated spirit that threatened to erode his concentration.

“O great gods who were birthed when the awesome Izanagi purified himself in the river of Himuka-no-Tachibana-no-Odo on the plains of Awagihara of Tsukushi Island, hear my plea! Purify and cleanse all that bears ill fortune, sin, and impurity!” He brought his hands together with a loud, resounding *clap*. A blast of wind rattled the main doors of the shrine, sending a gust of rain into the inner sanctum. The wintry, cold air blew through the darkness and carried it off beyond the horizon.

Misato’s jet-black hair danced in the gale before slowly billowing to rest down his back. He tentatively opened his squeezed-shut eyes, then breathed an enormous sigh of relief. After a tense moment, the fluorescent light flickered on again as though it had suddenly remembered its purpose.

“They’re gone,” Ookubo announced as he scanned the vicinity for any untoward presences.

“Yeah,” Misato agreed with a nod.

“Miyazawa. Yeh got pulled in for a second back there, right?”

Ookubo's tone was quiet and level as he faced Misato—a far cry from his usually bright and warm demeanor.

“...Yes,” Misato admitted hesitantly. His expression suggested that he was prepared for a scolding.

“All of us let our guard down sometimes,” Ookubo continued gently. “That’s why we always try to send at least two folks on the riskier jobs. Still, yeh gotta remember to practice self-control and keep your mental state in a good place. That’s often what saves us in our line of work.”

“You’re right.”

“I won’t meddle in yer private life, but if yeh bring it to work with yeh then it could lead to a nasty accident. Be more careful next time, aye?”

“Okay.” Misato bowed his head.

His thoughts were scattered because he had stayed up all night (and day) fretting. Phantoms exerted their influence by targeting the mind. Misato knew very well the importance of calming the mind and fortifying oneself before engaging with a spirit. Even so, he’d let his guard down. No matter how much he worried for his brother, Misato could do nothing as his current self. Saving Katsuki was out of the question if he was so easily distracted and taken advantage of by the enemy.

Somehow, Misato managed to cling to a shred of positivity before he totally succumbed to his brewing self-hatred. “I’ll definitely be more careful from now on. I’m really sorry about that,” he said, facing Ookubo directly.

Ookubo’s gaze softened, and he reached out to pat Misato gently on the shoulder. “We’re all countin’ on yeh, y’know. Keep yer chin up.”

“Thank you,” Misato said with an awkward smile.

Ookubo nodded in reply before turning to survey the room once more. “Ugh, well, we can’t open up the vessel again, but let’s have a gander for any documents or other materials. If either of yeh find somethin’, let me know, aye? And definitely don’t touch anythin’ without backup.”

“Roger that,” Tagami said, finally moving from his defensive position.

In turn, Misato and Ookubo inspected the altar installed at the back of the inner sanctum as well as searched its surroundings.

“It’d be good if we could find an account book or something

that mentions the box being rebuilt every seven years like Tagami said,” Misato supplied.

If they located a ledger that went back in seven-year increments and then compared those records with the dates of the famine, they’d be able to work out what year the shrine was erected.

“Yeh’re right,” Ookubo agreed, looking up at the ceiling in thought. “Say, Tagami...what’s the deal with adzuki beans in Nagaso nowadays? The farmers are still growin’ ’em, aye? Seein’ as there was a bunch of adzuki beans in with the vessel, I’m guessing they originally used to stuff ’em inside that dummy each year.”

If Nagaso-grown adzuki beans had infiltrated Tomoe Elementary School, they were still being cultivated in the area. They weren’t the sort of thing that was still good to eat decades after being harvested, after all.

“We villagers take turns growing the beans. Whoever grows them leaves ’em here at the shrine, and then they burn ’em at *tondo* festivals the following year with all the New Year’s decorations,” Tagami explained, also gazing ponderously at the ceiling. “Ah—that’s supposed ta change on a seven-year basis, too, actually. But ’cause there are so few families that can grow ’em, I reckon the same folk have been in charge of it for a couple odd decades now.”

Misato and Ookubo exchanged a glance.

“Could yeh possibly tell us their name?” Ookubo asked.

“Aye, I don’t see why not,” Tagami agreed readily. “Lemme give ’em a call for youse. I reckon they’ll be inside ’cause of this awful weather, too. Does that sound good?”

Ookubo took one last look around the shrine and quickly checked his watch before nodding in reply. “Please do. I don’t think we’re gonna make any more progress here.”

Sure enough, other than the offerings on the altar and the vessel itself, there was nothing else of note in the inner sanctum. It seemed their best strategy was to proceed with the information they already had.

By that point, it was just past noon. Ookubo and Misato told Tagami that they would prefer to visit the family sometime after one o’clock if possible, then the group finally stepped out of Nagaso Yasaka Shrine.

However...

One tiny, black rhinoceros beetle leaped into the air and flitted

into Misato's shadow, dissolving in its dusk.

MEANWHILE, about an hour beforehand, the Abnormal Disaster Unit was graced with the presence of an unusual visitor.

"Hey, 'sup everyone. Is Yoshida here?" A thug with blond, spiky hair and tinted sunglasses entered the room as casually as if he waltzed into the unit office every day.

Haruka Tsujimoto's eyes widened as he processed their unexpected guest's arrival. "Oh, Karino! What brings yeh here?"

It was Ryouji Karino, Misato Miyazawa's landlord and the very same man who had caused a huge stir at their office only a couple of months prior. He'd visited them a few times since to deal with the aftermath of the inugami case, but that was all over and done with. Haruka couldn't fathom why he was there.

"I'd just like to check somethin', really. I did give you a call yesterday."

Ah. Apparently that strange phone call the evening before had been from Karino. Yoshida had personally called the mystery party back shortly after returning to his desk.

"Ah, Karino. Before I get those documents you wanted, could you fill out a request form first?" said Yoshida as he popped his head around the partition at the back of the office that sectioned off a makeshift consulting room. He pointed a chair out to Karino before turning to Haruka. "Tsujimoto, if you could."

Karino plopped himself down on the folding chair in front of the improvised counter, his parka rustling with the movement.

Yoshida handed Haruka the request form, who showed it to Karino. "So..." Haruka began, "please fill in all the necessary information here. We'll need your address, name, contact info...as well as your ID and seal." He placed the form on the desk in front of Karino, then handed him a ballpoint pen.

An impish grin spread across Karino's face when Haruka mentioned his ID. "Whew, you're in luck!" he cackled. "Here's my fresh, shiny new driver's license—hot off the press!" He brandished it triumphantly.

Haruka plucked the card from Karino's fingers to find the expiration date printed in green. Because Karino hadn't been

officially recorded on a family register until a month prior, he'd actually been driving without a license. According to the perpetrator himself, he'd taken the utmost care and dedicated himself to honing his excellent driving skills—mostly so that no authorities discovered his unlawful seat behind the wheel.

“Ah, congratulations. Lucky they decided to turn a blind eye to all the things yeh got up to without a proper identity, huh?”

“For sure. Your manager's personal connections are somethin' else.”

The unit did have reason to help Karino in regard to his extremely peculiar history, although that wasn't something Haruka could shout from the rooftops. It wasn't that Karino *wanted* to operate in direct conflict with the law, but rather that he hadn't been afforded the legal rights that most people had due to his tumultuous childhood. The Abnormal Disaster Unit had managed to get his family register reinstated as well as revoke his death certificate. After which Yoshida pulled some strings to ensure the “criminal” record that Karino may have built amid those confused circumstances was wiped clean.

As it stood, there was not a single soul or object that could verify whether the man sitting in front of Haruka was truly Ryouji Karino—not even the man himself, in view of his amnesia. The only proof of—or testimony to—his identity that they'd ever possessed was a Tomoe doll currently situated in a certain white serpent spirit's stomach. Thus, the unit had no choice but to step in; cases in which otherworldly beings functioned as legal witnesses were rare, but when they did happen, it fell to the Abnormal Disaster Unit to liaise with the court and police.

“Do I *have* to say why I need the info?” Karino asked as he filled out the form.

Yoshida answered from his desk, where he was organizing a stack of papers. “You gotta write a reason down, yeah, but it doesn't have to be too detailed. Just put ‘For professional investigation’ or something along those lines.”

Karino nodded with an understanding hum and picked up the pen again. Out of sheer curiosity, Haruka peeked at the paper out of the corner of his eye.

“Oof, Tsujimoto. Quite the Peepin' Tom, ain'tcha?” tutted Karino, sliding the paper away and shielding it with his body.

“Sorry, sorry,” Haruka apologized awkwardly. “Is it for a job?”

“Bullseye. Can’t make Misato do all the work, can I? ‘Specially when it’s somethin’ you gotta go writin’ up forms for,” Karino said as he smoothly filled out the boxes. “I spoke about it on the phone with Yoshida yesterday and he said he’d have a look at the data you guys have. It’s a pretty urgent case, y’see.”

Observing his effortless literacy, no one would have ever thought Karino hadn’t completed his compulsory education. That realization had occurred to Haruka before, when Karino, at the office to settle the Inugami case, composed a statement so they could reinstate his family register. Karino could easily write kanji characters from memory, and it was obvious that he was used to writing clear, concise passages.

“So, yeh want a list of locations with high spiritual energy... Places where it would be easy for nawame to form... Is this a missing persons case or something?” Haruka guessed. He’d only actually spoken to Karino a handful of times, yet Miyazawa recounted humorous anecdotes about things Karino said or did so frequently that Haruka felt as though he already knew the man very well.

Karino replied with a wry laugh, narrowing his eyes behind his lightly tinted sunglasses as his shoulders shook with mirth. “Somethin’ like that. Can’t say no more, though—client confidentiality and all.”

If the person in question had been reported missing to the Tomoe police, no doubt the details would have found their way to the Abnormal Disaster Unit. Haruka shifted his gaze to Yoshida, who returned his look with a nod.

Yoshida put a finger up to his chin in thought. “Karino,” he said, “we won’t record anything officially, so could you at least give us a little insight as to what this is about? If we know what or who to look out for, we can contact you in the event we come across any clues.”

That time, Karino froze. After a few seconds, he groaned. As a citizen of Tomoe, he had the right to view the information he’d requested. Haruka and Yoshida were in no position to force him to tell them anything, so it all came down to whether Karino trusted them...

It did concern Haruka that Karino had not only avoided using Miyazawa as a convenient point of contact, but also seemed to be leaving him out of the matter altogether. Although Haruka couldn’t

complain about Miyazawa's stellar academic background, the young man had only one year of experience in a full-time job. It was possible Karino had taken on a case he'd prefer to keep secret from Miyazawa. Unlike Miyazawa, he had plenty of experience working in an environment that was pretty much underground, after all. The jobs that came from those shadier sources were unlikely to be all rainbows and sunshine.

Karino finished writing up his request. "Mghhh, I dunno about that..." he said with an anguished sigh, clearly torn about divulging information with regard to the case. He threw down the ballpoint pen and accepted the wad of papers Yoshida proffered him. It was a huge list, multiple pages long and fastened together with a stapler.

Karino sank back in his chair, squinting as he glanced through the packet. Suddenly, his hands stilled. "Come to think of it, Mount Kagura's probably connected to a nawame too, ain't it? Ugh, but... hmmm...I dunno..." He groaned again, scratching at his blond hair in frustration. Eventually, he let his arms fall limp as though he'd given up. "...That bastard can't be trusted anyway, though. Oh—is Misato out on a job, by the way?" He abruptly interrupted his little self-directed monologue to lift his sunglasses and peer at the schedule on the blackboard.

"Aye, he's out with Ookubo investigating Yasaka Shrine. They probably won't get back 'til the afternoon," Haruka said, nodding.

"Eh, all right, then," Karino finally conceded. "I'm a humble ol' freelance medium, y'know? If I go around spreadin' rumors about my clients, I'll lose my main source of income. I gotta be careful 'bout what I say, but just this once, I'll let you in on a few breadcrumbs—*only* cuz it's got to do with your newest hire. And I'm a carin' landlord, y'see." He huffed. "I betcha anythin' he's been actin' weird as hell for the past couple of days. Basically, it's to do with his family," he revealed with a grin. Tossing the papers onto the desk, he slouched down in the chair and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"His little bro ran away from home. Gone missin'," he continued. "And Misato's got a *serious* soft spot for his brother. I'm tellin' ya, it's terminal; he couldn't sleep all night cuz he's so worried. Also, the guys that put me on the case went out of their way to contact me even though they know y'all at the town hall exist. I dunno whether it's them bein' scared their reputation will suffer if the news gets out among other psychics or what, but

they're being super weird 'bout it. Is that enough info for ya?" As he concluded his fluid rambling, he rose from the chair. "You can work the rest out yourselves."

Haruka couldn't help but feel that Karino had completely glossed over the actual case to yammer about other things, but the man left little room for questioning. Karino picked up the bundle of paper and folded it in three before sticking it into his pocket, then sloppily pushed the chair backward to walk away from the desk.

"See yas," he said, waving his right hand casually. "Oh, and by the way—when Misato gets back, make sure ya give him a proper grillin' and tell him to stay focused on the job, manager. Cheers for the data." He turned on his heel, the fur trim on his parka swaying in the air as he pivoted.

"No, no, thank *you* very much for talking to us," Yoshida replied with a sincere smile. "We'll try to make sure Miyazawa doesn't cause any trouble for you."

They waved to Karino in turn as he opened the sliding door, causing a gust of cold air to filter into the office. The poorly fitted door emitted an ailing squeak when Karino closed it, and the warmth of the office was conserved once more. Once they heard Karino's footsteps fade into the distance, Haruka and Yoshida turned to look at each other.

"So...Miyazawa's little brother...he's gotta be the next head of the Narukami clan, right? Sounds like he's gone missing somewhere around Tomoe, then," Yoshida said with a gruff sigh, folding his arms. "What a mess."

Haruka nodded in agreement, wiping away the fog that had formed on his glasses. "The family probably doesn't want the news going public. If they don't find him, that'll mean both successors ended up running away from home... It sure is a big deal."

Miyazawa already had his hands full with work, so it probably did him no favors to be saddled with personal problems while he was trying to solve the tangled riddles surrounding Mount Kagura.

"Still, we're lucky Karino decided to tell us that much," Haruka hummed. "We wouldn't want to intrude on Miyazawa's private life by asking a buncha weird questions."

"You said it," concurred Yoshida.

Haruka remembered how fervently Miyazawa had battled for Karino when the inugami almost drained Karino's life force. So Karino was doing all *he* could to resolve the issue that was weighing

so heavily on Miyazawa. They were both outcasts in the same profession, living under the same roof, and evidently had each other's backs no matter what.

“Makes me kinda jealous,” Haruka murmured absentmindedly. Yoshida gave a hearty chortle in response.

Chapter 7: Ties

A magnificent *whoosh* tore through the mountains.

Katsuki squinted, shielding his face from rogue wood chippings in the sudden gust's wake.

"What...? Oh no. Misat—!" The shikigami he'd been relentlessly pursuing fled before he could even finish his sentence. His shoulders drooped in disappointment. "I thought I'd finally caught up to you..." With heavy steps, he turned to go back the way he'd come.

The barrier around the mountain was almost disrupted for a second there... Is it something to do with that girl, I wonder?

Katsuki thought back to the gaunt, thin girl clothed in rags who lived there. He'd met her after following the path of a nawame into the mountains, guided by traces of his brother's presence. The echoes of her singsong call seemed bound to the peak—and Katsuki had condemned himself the moment he accidentally answered. Since the word "Yeah" left his mouth, he'd most likely spent several aimless days in the wilds, utterly dazed with no concept of time.

He didn't feel hunger or fatigue. He was neither too hot, nor too cold. Both he and the range around him had drifted to a complete standstill, all shrouded by a cloak of mist; when Katsuki looked up, the blanched blackness gave the illusion of a space that was neither light nor dark. Though he could see, there was no shadow fastened to his feet. It was a twilight world that could only exist in a realm sequestered from that of the living.

"Katsuki!" rang a girl's voice from the summit he was heading toward. She came pelting down the slope, her scrawny figure clad in naught but a worn, frayed kimono that barely reached her knees.

"Yeah? What was that all about?" he replied.

"Guess what?! I just found another demon—just like us!" she announced gleefully.

"Another...demon?" Katsuki could only hope that she meant in the sense of a game of tag.

The girl claimed that she was twelve years old and had been

waiting all by herself, confined to the mountains, for the game of tag to begin. The reason she counted Katsuki as “another demon” was due to the panicked explanation he’d blurted out upon realizing his slipup.

“I’m chasing someone, too,” he’d insisted. To a certain extent it was true—and he figured he’d be in much greater danger if he’d identified himself as a target for the ghostly girl. Although it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, Katsuki believed it had at least been the correct one. He was unable to breach the boundary that surrounded the mountain due to his association with the girl, but for the time being, she welcomed him in her domain, so he didn’t have to worry about starving or freezing to death.

The girl had been searching for someone for untold years. Specifically, her younger sister, who had left her at the summit of the mountain, tasking the girl with being the demon before running away to hide. The girl never saw her little sister again.

“That’s right. Now we’ll definitely be able to find Ofusa!” she giggled innocently. On the surface she appeared to be no more than a regular little girl and to harbor no desire to hurt anyone.

But by calling out for her sister, it seems she’s drawing actual, living humans to the mountains instead. Misato probably planted that shikigami here to serve as a substitute for anyone in danger of getting pulled in.

The shikigami Misato had sent to randomly wander the slopes was designed to take the place of a particular person. In other words, Katsuki could infer that in the world of the living, real people were coming to harm as a result of the girl’s summons. And in the meantime, all Katsuki could do was watch the girl with a heavy heart. Her intentions were anything but malicious. In fact, she likely had no idea she’d even left the human realm. Time had simply come to a standstill when she was first trapped on the Other Side of the mountain. She remembered only her responsibility as an older sister—her role as the demon in an endless game of hide-and-seek tag.

Katsuki recalled how she’d replied when he asked her name: “Oh, me? Um, well... I’m Ofusa’s older sister!” she proclaimed. “We’re playing hide-and-seek tag. It’s Ofusa’s turn to hide, so I’m waiting for her to find a spot. The only thing is...she *still* hasn’t said she’s ready for me to come find her and won’t come back even when I ask her to. I don’t know what to do...”

Katsuki's chest constricted as he remembered the tone of her voice. The girl couldn't even remember her own name.

A name is like a spell; it can define and represent a person. But she's lost hers entirely...

The years had whittled the girl's identity down to just two facets: Ofusa's older sister and the demon in a game of hide-and-seek tag. She was at the mercy of a spiritual world that distorted space and time, and those who might have told the girl who she was and reinforced her selfhood no longer existed. No—her only option was to cling to and protect her remaining purpose. And so her calls dragged people across the border between life and death to take Ofusa's place.

Katsuki considered the Narukami shikigami he'd lost sight of a few minutes prior. He knew that the twisted cords that formed the doll were interwoven with his brother's hair. *If I could just grab it, I'd be able to track his location with his hair. But...I also don't wanna cause trouble for him at work by disrupting his countermeasures.*

Katsuki could deduce that Misato was still utilizing his spiritual powers to make a living although he'd forsaken the clan. He was even using Narukami rituals and incantations. For some reason, that fact soothed Katsuki. It granted him comfort to know that the brother he loved so dearly was still part of the same mystical world as Katsuki even if the ground they walked on and the air they breathed were different.

If I keep watching that shikigami, I should be able to find Misato eventually.

The spiritual barrier enclosing the mountain prevented him from leaving just as it did the girl's ghost, their circumstances somehow linked. He could attempt to force his way out... But doing so would also release her spirit into the living realm, and she had probably been imprisoned there because she'd become a perilous force that inadvertently ensnared humans in her pursuit of her sister.

"Let's go back up to the shrine to play," the girl said, grabbing hold of Katsuki's hand and tugging him back up the slope. They seemed to glide through the wood and underbrush, taking only a few dozen paces before an *iwakura* rock—a stone believed to house a god—came into view. The *iwakura* lay near the summit, yet moments before, Katsuki had been roaming the wilderness close to the mountain's foot. The laws of physics didn't seem to apply to the

Other Side.

It's as though she can manipulate the land at will...almost like she's the ruler of the whole mountain. But—

Katsuki's ponderous theorizing was cut short by a bewildering change in scenery. At some point, he'd taken a step forward only for the vegetation and curls of bark at his feet to vanish in a blink of an eye. Instead, the ground was coated with dried-up leaves, and the steep gradient had morphed into a gentle incline that led to a huge, grayish-brown rock that towered above them.

Moss and bushes coiled around the iwakura, its weathered, rocky zenith seemingly exposed by the will of the mountain itself. The monolith tilted precariously, and countless rainfalls had worn bizarre, curved lines across its surface. Toward its base, the earth had given way to a deep, sunken cavern. An old, battered, hempen *shimenawa* rope adorned the top of the stone, the purpose of which was to purify the sacred landmark. A tiny shrine stood just in front of the entrance to the cavern—that was where the demon girl lived.

It was a small, humble structure, more akin to a hokora than an actual shrine. In fact, it was so small that whether a single child could fit inside was debatable. Katsuki certainly doubted *he* could—especially alongside another person—although he was much shorter than others his age. But after he squeezed through the tight entranceway, a room of about 140 square feet with wooden flooring stretched out before him. The miniscule doorway reminded him of the entrances to teahouses where guests had to shuffle in on their knees to gain access to the space. The floor was artlessly littered with children's toys, evidence of how the girl spent her time when she wasn't searching for her sister.

She said she came to the mountains to play hide-and-seek with her little sister, and it seems like this shrine was already here at the time, but still...

When Katsuki inspected its vicinity and interior, he concluded that the shrine was originally intended to shelter a child who'd been sacrificed to the mountains. The toys were no doubt offerings to comfort the child in death, yet they were so old that Katsuki had only ever seen similar items in museums. If the girl was the human sacrifice that had been enshrined in the iwakura, it didn't seem as though she was being properly worshipped or cared for.

And she doesn't even realize she was sacrificed. As Katsuki's thoughts raced, the soft patter of the girl's feet across the

floorboards caught his attention. She bent down to look for a particular toy, her back to Katsuki.

“So,” he piped up, “what are we gonna play this time? Cat’s cradle again? Or do you wanna have a thumb war?” He was running out of children’s games, though luckily she didn’t appear to have grown sick of his limited repertoire yet. She’d invited Katsuki into her home and joyfully pestered him to play with her, but despite her enthusiasm, he felt he could detect a loneliness within her.

I don’t think I can appease her spirit just through my efforts to play with her, but...I know Misato would hear her out if he were in my position. His brother was a kind person with a soft smile. Katsuki was sure Misato would have treated the poor girl warmly and with compassion.

The girl eagerly snatched up the cat’s cradle string. Katsuki had noticed that she preferred games that required at least two people. She hadn’t been able to play those for a long time, so Katsuki dredged his faded memories of playing with Misato from the depths of his mind to keep her entertained.

“All right. Bring it on,” Katsuki said, sitting down on the wooden floor and crossing his legs.

In a spare moment, he’d placed several contraptions designed to pursue Misato’s shikigami at the foot of the mountain. They floated lazily on the wind, meandering back and forth between the worlds of the living and the dead, and at least seemed to be repeatedly orbiting the same area.

No one had been spirited to the Other Side since Katsuki started playing with the girl. If he managed to catch the shikigami while the girl’s attention was focused on him, Misato would most likely sense that something was amiss.

I’m not used to talking to kids younger than me, but I’m actually not doing too badly. Misato must have spent a lot of time entertaining me like this as well.

Misato was five years his senior and had arrived at the Narukami household when Katsuki was too young to form real memories, though he remembered relying on his kind, older brother for most of his ensuing childhood. Misato had always been there for him.

Well, it’s not like he was always perfect. I’m not surprised being pushed around by a kid five years younger than him made him want to

cause some mischief once in a while. It had rarely happened, but there'd been instances in which Misato stole candy from Katsuki while he wasn't looking or blatantly cheated at a game they were playing together.

Sometimes Misato successfully convinced him otherwise and Katsuki only realized years later that he'd been had, whereas on other occasions Katsuki kicked up a huge fuss, throwing a tantrum until Misato ended up consoling him. But even those times were included in Katsuki's most treasured memories; Misato had pretty much been his entire life back then.

"I used to play games like this with Ofusa, too," the girl said. "She was sooo bad at cat's cradle... She used to get the string all knotted up and start crying. I had to undo the knots for her..." She continued to speak idly as her thin fingers dexterously maneuvered the string. The vast majority of the stories she told involved lamenting how difficult it was to look after her little sister. The incidents she related weren't easy to listen to, and Katsuki's heart began to sting.

"It always goes the same way. Ofusa starts whining, then I get mad. That's why Mom hates me," she spat, her words resentful. A noticeably sharp sensation of guilt flared within Katsuki, regret lingering in his chest.

"Maybe I wanna eat mochi and play with pinwheels sometimes, too! But *no*, I always push that down. It all belongs to *Ofusa*. And 'cause I'm *her* sister, I always have to ignore what I want, be strong, and protect her so she doesn't cry." She pouted. When she said, "'cause I'm her sister," it almost sounded as if her tyrant-like little sister had weaponized that fact to control her.

"But...don't you think Ofusa loved you? You used to play with her all the time," Katsuki said. He hesitated slightly at the beginning of his sentence, hoping to address her by name, but once again realized he didn't know it. She didn't even remember it herself; she recognized only the epithets "sister" and "demon."

Katsuki could remember times when he himself had abused his power as the younger sibling to get Misato to do what he wanted. Yet even when Katsuki had scowled and stamped his feet, Misato responded as patiently as ever. Misato was the sole person who'd actually *listened* to Katsuki throughout his impersonal, regimented upbringing.

Misato... My only brother...

Katsuki recollected how Misato had become very particular about the fact that his surname was *Miyazawa* after his birth mother, Akemi, disappeared. What did Misato even think of him? Or think about everything that had happened? Katsuki had never actually asked outright.

Maybe being my older brother was yet another chain that bound him. That thought had certainly occurred to Katsuki before. He would never forget the cold, pale-white expression on Misato's face the very last time he saw his brother. Misato hadn't so much as glanced in Katsuki's direction as he passed by. *Or...maybe it was the exact opposite. I don't know.*

Each story the girl recounted only cut deeper into Katsuki's heart, fear and guilt overwhelming him. Misato could still ultimately reject Katsuki in spite of all his efforts. Both Katsuki and the Narukamis might be a distant past that Misato would rather stay entombed in darkness forever.

No—I won't let that happen. I'll change the Narukami clan. I'll take Father's place and make sure it becomes somewhere Misato is always welcome. I won't let him experience any more suffering. That had become his goal the day Misato left home—the only driving force in his otherwise bleak, joyless life. And so he quietly chose to disregard the terrifying possibility of rejection. He told himself that as long as he found Misato, everything would return to how it used to be.

"That's true. Ofusa loved playing hide-and-seek tag with me. Right now she must be looking for the perfect hiding place so I'll never, ever find her."

A cold wind blew through the shrine. The room was dimly lit by a small window just under the eaves, although it was impossible to tell where exactly the light came from in a realm of perpetual dusk.

The shadows that dwelled in the room's four corners seemed to begin to squirm. *There's a dark, dark presence in here.*

"I think so, too. You can play cat's cradle with me while you wait, okay?" Katsuki murmured.

Ofusa must be looking forward to you finding her. Katsuki swallowed the words back down, leaving his white lie unsaid.

RYOUI remembered the hot, humid night from six months before. The tepid summer darkness had seemed like the setting of a bad dream, and the creature he witnessed like something out of legend.

The sound of a flute had just pierced the dull, sweltering night, then fallen silent once more. Misato's hands dropped to his knees, the stone flute rolling from his limp grip onto his disarrayed futon. His head drooped to his chest. His black, sweat-soaked hair stuck to his cheeks, obscuring his face, so Ryouji couldn't discern his expression.

The sliding screen door that opened into the courtyard rattled urgently. Then, from the resultant gap, something slithered into the room. Pearlescent scales gleamed and glimmered along its undulating body, reflecting the light of the fluorescent bulb.

It was a white serpent.

Its pale body curved across the tatami mats, lured by the former call of the flute. It wriggled onto the futon and coiled around Misato, who seemed unable to move. His head still bowed, he quietly mumbled, "Welcome back." His kimono shifted underneath the snake, and Ryouji watched the serpent spiral up a pale thigh before disappearing under the fabric. It slid over Misato's exposed, damp skin before twining itself around his neck. Misato was yet motionless. He didn't appear to be cognizant of his surroundings whatsoever.

Next to him, Ryouji observed the whole process, captivated. Through Misato's onyx veil of hair, he spotted rosebud-colored lips quirked in a small smile. There was no telling whether it was a smile of joy, relief, or simple acceptance.

Then the serpent's head plunged into Misato's shoulder. Misato flinched, his faint pink lips parting slightly with a gasp. Breathing somewhat raggedly, he slouched forward as though to further present his shoulder blade to the creature. The rest of the snake followed suit, slowly melting under Misato's skin as it unwound itself from his neck.

Misato remained unmoving, his head tucked to his chest while he endured the uncomfortable sensation of the snake gradually reemerging with him. The sleeve of his kimono slipped off his shoulder, revealing his bare back. The patch of skin the serpent was slinking through shimmered under the dim, yellowed light of the bulb above them.

Well. I kinda feel like I shouldn't be watching this.

Ryouji held his breath, his eyes trained on the sight before him. As the snake continued to vanish into his body, Misato suddenly reached up to stroke it with long, elegant fingers as if he'd regained some semblance of awareness.

His lengthy black hair came tumbling over his shoulders, hiding his face even more. Ryouji didn't know whether he was moving to push the snake away or welcome it. He additionally had no idea whether Misato was just taking the humiliating situation in stride or whether it was a show of feeling slightly embarrassed.

What he did know was that the scene before him was bewitching. It was beautiful but at the same time heart-wrenchingly sad.

Eventually, the long, arduous process was over.

Misato was finally able to pull his nightclothes back over his body, a weary, irritated scowl on his face. He remained silent, either by choice or due to sheer exhaustion. Abruptly he looked up as though he'd only just remembered that Ryouji was there.

Ryouji spoke before Misato could say a thing. "That must've been tough on ya. Here—remember to return the flute, yeah?" he murmured in the gentlest, most compassionate tone he could muster. He got to his feet, and Misato gave no reply.

Ryouji decided to leave the room and not bother him any further. Misato would most likely never mention the episode again, and Ryouji would probably never speak of the entrancing spectacle he'd witnessed that night either.

The sound of the sliding door closing echoed in the still, summer air.

AFTER spending more time with the spiritual pair, Ryouji had at least come to understand that Misato's connection with Shirota—the white serpent—wasn't a bad thing. Though Misato was quick to complain about the spirit, he nevertheless accepted it as part of him and even let the creature roam the Karino estate as it wished from time to time. Shirota didn't engage with Ryouji particularly often, although occasionally Ryouji heard rustling noises outside the window facing the rear garden. He could only assume that the snake was hunting down tasty-smelling, spiritual snacks and

feasting on them. Despite the atypicality of the situation, Ryouji didn't really mind—anything to curb the population of specters that haunted the estate.

He'd already sent the list of nawame he picked up at Town Hall that morning to Wakatake. They'd also met in person to discuss a general outline of which sites they would tackle first, then soon went their separate ways to prepare for the following day. Neither of them wanted to linger in the other's presence for too long, so the brief meeting had suited the both of them.

As for Misato, he seemed to be functioning on a bare minimum of energy. He hadn't even come to greet Ryouji when he finally arrived home from work at eight o'clock that evening. Instead, he went straight to the outbuilding, and Ryouji noticed the light switching off not long after.

It was the middle of the night. Ever the night owl, Ryouji had been browsing various websites and doing nothing in particular as was his wont. Eventually, releasing a hefty sigh and scratching the back of his head, he started readying for bed. He had an early start the next morning.

"But I can't wind down," he grumbled. He felt unsettled somehow—like a sense of foreboding was preventing him from getting sleepy.

Whatever. I'll just go brush my teeth.

He opened the living room door to head for the sink, and a strong, wintery chill immediately breezed into the room. The cold floorboards creaked underneath his weight when he stepped out onto them. He walked past the storage room where he'd encountered Shirota for the first time and toward the north side of the main house where the plumbing was located.

All of a sudden, a door or window frame rattled in the distance. The sound seemed to be coming from the outbuilding or the adjoining external corridor.

Taking another nighttime stroll, huh, Shirota?

Ryouji found himself absently turning in the direction of the noise. It was possible that allowing Shirota to gallivant about the property and graze on various spirits was a method of stress reduction for Misato. Over time, Ryouji had observed that whenever the serpent rummaged around at night, it was typically when Misato was absolutely exhausted. Perhaps he was simply too tired to keep the snake properly sealed inside him or maybe the snake

was willingly shouldering Misato's agitation while the man got some sleep. Either way, whether Misato had permitted it or not, Shiota's activity indicated he was going through a rough spot.

He's a pretty simple creature, but...what the hell's all this rattlin' and shakin' about? It's way too loud. The clattering against the glass door persisted relentlessly. It sounded like Shiota was desperately struggling to wrench the door open, and Ryouji was acutely aware of how easily glass broke in midwinter.

He heaved a large sigh, wishing Misato would just open the door for Shiota as usual. "Hey, Shiota. Would you mind not destroyin' my house? Or else I'll exorcise ya," he called. He crossed the dirt floor near the house's entrance and peeked down the outer corridor. In all honesty, he wasn't sure he'd be *able* to exorcise the creature with his current abilities. In fact, he had a feeling he'd be gobbled up in seconds if he tried.

Out of nowhere, the giant white serpent came charging down the passageway, its slithering form spanning the entire floor.

"WHA—!" Ryouji yelped in surprise.

Shiota was able to control his size to a certain extent, and at that moment he was in full-blown predator mode. His pure white body and crimson eyes drew ever closer...but Ryouji knew he was nothing to be scared of.

Japanese rat snakes had round snouts and equally round, cute eyes. Considering Shiota's impressive appearance, Ryouji might have easily believed the tales that said touching a white snake brought financial luck—but in reality, his host was near destitute. Shiota's face was so charming and amiable that Ryouji could joke about such things freely.

Shiota slid to a stop and raised his head to meet Ryouji's gaze.

"Huh...? D'ya need me or somethin'?" questioned Ryouji.

Shiota continued to stare, his split tongue flitting out to taste the air. Unfortunately, not even Ryouji's tengu eyes were blessed with the ability to read a reptile's mind based on its imploring looks alone. After a few moments of contemplation, Ryouji wondered if Shiota just wanted him to open the sliding door. He walked toward it, and Shiota watched on patiently as he drew the net curtain out of the way and fiddled with the lock on the doorframe. When he pulled it open, the cold, December night air came rushing into the hallway.

"Aight, it's open now. Out ya go. Wait 'til morning to come

back, yeah? Good boy.” Ryouji slapped a hearty hand on the giant snake, urging him to slip out the door.

The very instant Shiota’s cool scales rubbed against the palm of his hand, he heard something: *“Let’s go.”*

“The heck?” Ryouji replied with a jolt. No doubt about it—he’d heard the thoughts of the huge serpent in front of him. He curiously placed his hand back down on the pearly scales. “Now, back up a sec here,” resumed Ryouji. “Where are you goin’? Misato will be all messed up if you go missin’ again.” Though at least his subsequent fever wouldn’t make him as delirious as it had at the height of summer. Even so, Ryouji didn’t want to pile more trouble onto Misato when he was already distraught.

“The mountains. Katsuki’s there.”

“What?!” His voice rose about an octave in response. Shiota halted on his way out of the house, turning to face Ryouji. “And... wait. Since when have you been able to talk?”

That was normally what someone would be most shocked by, but there were more important matters to address. He couldn’t just ignore Shiota’s suggestion.

“Does that mean y’know where Katsuki is, then? Where?” Ryouji asked frantically. “Was it the place you and Misato went this afternoon? Why didn’t you tell him?!”

“Misato...not listening to Shiota.”

Ryouji had no way of knowing for certain but could readily imagine Misato being so busy with whatever he was dealing with that he was neglecting the spirit’s cries for attention.

“So that’s why you’re askin’ me to come with ya now?”

“Yeah.”

Ryouji pursed his lips, frozen in thought. He removed his sunglasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing heavily. “How the heck should I deal with this?” he groaned as he awkwardly ran a hand through his blond hair.

Don’t tell me this guy’s resorting to going off on his own ’cause Misato’s been tryna reason away his gut feeling... Ryouji was sure that if Misato learned of Shiota’s discovery, he’d want to tear off in pursuit of Katsuki as soon as possible.

Yes, Ryouji had told him to focus on his work and leave his brother to him, yet it seemed as though Misato had taken that order a little too far. The snake had escaped as a result of Misato’s attempts to suppress his emotions—which didn’t help *either* of them.

Ryouji truly had his hands full with his lodger.

If he was feeling that bad about it, he coulda just vented to me for a bit. Damn.

Misato tended to avoid talking about himself. And after spending more than half a year as his roommate-cum-landlord, Ryouji was pretty certain that it wasn't simply because Misato was naturally secretive or wished to isolate himself.

"Okay, I get it, I get it. So calm down, yeah? First, you tell me where Katsuki is," Ryouji instructed the snake. "When we've worked that out, you can just go straight back to your master. I'll go get Katsuki by myself, aight?" He nudged Shiota back into the house, and the serpent obediently shuffled inside, swiveling to look at him. Ryouji slid the glass door shut again, then asked the vital question: "So. Which mountain is Katsuki at?"

"Mountain."

"Yeah, but...which mountain?" reiterated Ryouji.

"....."

He waited a while longer, but no reply came. Apparently, Shiota wasn't quite shrewd enough to have memorized the name of the mountain.

"Ugh, okay, okay," Ryouji said with a sigh. "Then what were you doin' when you sensed Katsuki?"

"Shrine. Connected to mountain." The spirit's round, ruby-like eyes were fixed on Ryouji.

The words Ryouji could pick up from touching his scales were broken and laconic; Shiota's thoughts probably weren't all too complex to begin with. Ryouji could tell they weren't going to get anywhere that night.

He pursed his lips again and nodded. "Gotcha. Welp, let's go back to Misato's room for now, yeah?" he urged. "I'll carry you there if you can shrink for me." He gave the surprisingly compliant snake two brisk pats on the back.

"Okay," Shiota replied before rapidly shrinking to a much smaller size. By the end of his transformation, he was about the same length as a normal Japanese rat snake, and Ryouji was able to haul the creature over his shoulder with a careless toss.

"Good boy," he praised. "Aight—let's tell your host what's happened."

Their first mission was to give Ryouji's penniless tenant a rude awakening.

A young voice echoed from afar. “*Misato!*” the boy shouted, his manner of speech strangely formal for his age.

“Katsuki?” Misato questioned in disbelief, half-jogging in the general direction of his voice. He ran out the back door of the house and forced his way through the brush to the mountain slope that loomed behind the foliage. Out of the assortment of trees that blocked his view, a diminutive shadow came flying toward him. “Katsuki! Where on earth were you?!”

“Misato!” Katsuki leaped at Misato, throwing his arms around his brother.

Misato hugged him in return, the boy small and warm in his arms. He ruffled Katsuki’s naturally brown, slightly wavy hair—a far cry from his own iron-straight, jet-black locks. Crouching down to secure Katsuki in a tight embrace, he finally felt as though he could breathe again. “Thank goodness you’re safe... I was sick with worry!”

It’s supposed to be my job to keep him safe. I knew I shouldn’t have taken my eyes off him for even a second.

“I’m sorry,” Misato began, “I was—”

“I’m here to pick you up, Misato! Let’s go home now!” Katsuki announced triumphantly as he lifted his head, tugging at Misato’s clothes with both of his tiny hands.

“Go...home?” repeated Misato in confusion. He’d only just left home a few moments before to find Katsuki. Their house was right behind them—or at least, it was supposed to be.

His little brother nodded furiously. “You wouldn’t come home, so I came to find you! Without you, I dunno what I... I...” His slender eyebrows knitted together, and shimmering teardrops dusted the long eyelashes framing his big, round eyes.

“I know, kiddo, I know. I really am sorry.”

The boy, though slight and weak, was a very sweet soul. If Misato failed to properly protect him, he would one day lose his warmheartedness and freeze amid the unfeeling adults. He was like a fluffed-up bird in the palm of Misato’s hand, alone but for his brother.

“C’mon, let’s go home now, ’kay?” Katsuki prompted again, letting go of Misato’s shirt and wriggling out of his arms to pull on his hand instead.

“Okay.” Misato nodded, then got to his feet. Katsuki’s innocent gaze remained riveted on Misato and Misato only.

He still remembers me, huh? I didn’t realize he still needed me...

Katsuki clearly viewed Misato as an indispensable constant in his life. And Misato loved him and even held a sort of life-and-death power over him given the strength of Katsuki’s affection. Yet, at the same time, Misato’s only worth was derived from his role as Katsuki’s brother. Forced to devote himself to his little brother, Misato had no life outside of serving the small child. In the eyes of society, Misato’s existence was an unnecessary one—unless he was willing to act the part of older brother. But the moment Katsuki no longer needed him, Misato would lose his place in the family.

Misato could see things that most people couldn’t. He was at the mercy of beings they couldn’t even sense. He teamed up with entities they could never believe in. So it was no wonder that he had been an Outsider from the very beginning. He was an abnormality born with the ability to perceive phantoms and shadows, after all. If he were driven out of the community of people who possessed that same strange power, he could only rot away and die in obscurity. Alone.

Katsuki... You’re the only thing...the only person who can...

When he tried to step toward Katsuki, Misato immediately tipped forward. Rather than advancing, he was left staring at his own feet. They were completely rooted to the spot.

“Wha—?!” A tangle of ivy had wound around his feet and ankles, tying him in place as vines sprouted from the ground. Several layers deep, they began to climb up his legs until, twisting and thickening, they transformed into a huge serpent. After entirely enveloping Misato’s torso, it reared its head.

“Misato?” called Katsuki, turning to see why his brother wasn’t following him.

The snake crawled further up Misato’s body. Like always, it slithered over his collarbone before slipping down the nape of his neck and diving into his shoulder blade.

His little brother watched the revolting scene unfold, his mouth gaping open.

“Stop,” Misato pleaded. “Don’t look.”

Katsuki’s tiny hand left Misato’s. He took one, two frightened steps back as his dumbfounded, cherubic face contorted in fear.

“Wait!” Compelled by desperation, Misato abruptly grabbed

Katsuki's arm with his right hand. He pulled and pulled with all his might, and Katsuki writhed to escape in a state of terror. Misato's strength surged uncontrollably within him as he did all he could to keep the boy firmly at his side.

You belong to me.

Misato's left hand shot out, wrapping around Katsuki's thin neck.

He's mine.

Misato *needed* that frail, arrogant, lovable creature that had taught him hardship and patience; the boy was the only thing that gave him worth.

He brought both hands around Katsuki's neck. If Katsuki ran away on him, he'd lose it all. *I can't go home anymore. And if I can't, then he can't either.*

"Stop it! *Get off me!*" Katsuki struggled with all the strength he could muster. If he got even a step further away, Misato wouldn't be able to reach him from where he was shackled to the earth.

Katsuki tumbled to the ground and quickly staggered away without looking back.

"Katsuki! *Katsuki!*" Misato screamed wildly.

The boy's small silhouette disappeared beyond the trees, leaving silence in his wake.

Why...?

Why would Katsuki leave me here?

I sacrificed myself for him. I did everything I could possibly do for him. I always doted on him and cherished him. So why?

"I have to go after him..." he panted, his voice ragged. "Yeah... He'll be there..."

Katsuki would be waiting for Misato to find him—just like always. Of course he would be.

A tiny, black rhinoceros beetle briefly flitted across Misato's line of vision.

Ties (noun)

Definition

1. Connections between individuals that cannot be severed (e.g., family ties) or close-knit relationships that are not easily

escaped.

2. String or rope used to fasten or restrain an animal.

Tie (verb)

Definition

1. To fasten two things together.
2. To restrict freedom.

Chapter 8: Chains

“RIN, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen!”

With a *zzzp*, energy flew from the tips of Ryouji’s fingers and rattled the sliding door to the outbuilding. The mass of black rhinoceros beetles swarming across it were flicked away, spraying into the air.

“Eugh, I can’t stand the gross li’l critters!” he spat as he flung the door open, Shiota still wrapped around his shoulders.

He invoked the purifying fire of Acala by chanting, *“Namah samanta vajranam ham!”* and mystical white flames licked at the walls of the Japanese-style room, burning away the sooty haze that festered where Misato lay unconscious on his futon. The gloom of pure evil that permeated the air had a strange quality to it; it didn’t appear to be a specter, nor did it resemble a human ghost with a grudge. The miasma was more akin to a gooey, stagnant liquid or some food that had been forgotten and left to rot at the back of a cupboard.

“Misato!” Shiota cried out, panicked.

“Whoa, whoa. Calm down there,” Ryouji interjected, trying to soothe the snake spirit as it tightened dangerously around him. *“Humans don’t burn in those flames, y’know? On the other hand, I bet it wouldn’t do you a whole lotta good, so stay with me. All right?”*

Taking a deep breath, he stepped inside the room. *“Misato! WAKE UP! I know y’ain’t gonna let this nasty stuff eat you alive!”* he yelled urgently.

He had no idea where Misato had picked them up, but it was no exaggeration to say he’d been rather severely possessed by the shadowy beetles. And considering that Shiota was Misato’s most effective protection from malevolent spirits, the fact that they’d evaded even the white serpent’s notice meant either that he faced a very troublesome opponent...or that they had wormed their way into Misato’s innermost self.

That’s not a bad guess. The guy’s left his heart totally unguarded

the past few days, after all.

With a shameless click of his tongue, Ryouji tore the covers away from Misato's curled-up, trembling body. "*Wake the HELL up, you idiot!*"

That time, Misato's eyes jolted open. His terrified, bewildered gaze quickly shifted to Ryouji. "Ah!" he yelped, shaking off Ryouji's hand as it reached for his shoulder. He cowered, poisoning himself for defense. "R—...Ryouji...?" he mumbled weakly.

His unbound black hair was in complete disarray, splayed across his face. His behavior was that of a wounded animal. "Shiro...ta...?" Misato's voice wavered when he noticed the snake hanging off Ryouji's shoulders. Confusion contorted his expression further. Ever so slowly, he relaxed, then sat up properly.

"That's right." Ryouji nodded. "He skedaddled, so I came to give him back to ya. But more importantly... The heck did you bring into our home, huh?"

Immediately, Shirota slid from Ryouji's shoulder and attempted to retreat to his domicile within Misato. The moment he slithered up Misato's knees, however, Misato let loose a mighty scream and jerked away from the serpent in sheer panic.

"Go away! *Go away!*" he cried, clutching at his body with both arms as if to shield himself, wholly rejecting the snake's advance.

"Hey! C'mon," Ryouji said in shock.

Misato didn't reply. His breaths came in harsh wheezes, his shoulders rising and falling with each lungful of air. Shirota seemed just as perturbed: his head wobbled from side to side as he dazedly lingered where Misato had launched him.

Unsure of how to approach Misato, Ryouji ended up tending to Shirota first. He gently picked the snake up to perch atop his shoulders like before. He could sense a flood of baffled emotion through the creature's scales.

"I'll put a purification barrier up 'round the room, aight...?" Ryouji said hesitantly. "Come see me once you've cooled down a bit. Shirota will be with me 'til then."

And with that, Ryouji left the building the way he'd come. Once he closed the sliding door behind him, he carefully caressed the serpent frozen in alarm over his shoulders. Misato's reaction must've been quite the shock for Shirota. "Guess he's never rejected ya before, huh? That's a surprise," Ryouji murmured softly. "Hey, don't cry. I'm sure he just had a bad dream or somethin'."

What the hell am I doing?

Ryouji looked up at the midnight sky, calming the snake spirit around his neck with soothing squeezes for an entirely different reason than a few minutes prior.

I need to go after him.

That thought blazed in the depths of his gut, a burning sensation spurring him on in the dusk of his dreams. Yet the specific situation he'd been accosted with during his slumber seemed to lose substance and drift away the second he opened his eyes.

"...It got me," he croaked, clenching his fists in a mixture of frustration and self-loathing. Misato, a professional exorcist, had brought a malicious spirit home with him. The malevolence had vehemently latched onto his feelings toward his brother. Goosebumps broke out over his entire body in the wake of his confrontation with the dark emotions that the spirit had forcibly dredged up from his past.

Worst of all, it wasn't as though he'd been totally oblivious to the sentiments gnawing away at the walls of his heart. Although he'd honestly tried to temper his resentment and be a good brother, he most definitely couldn't say he'd succeeded—and eventually he'd thrown away that old life and left it behind altogether. He'd sealed away the resulting soul-crushing guilt, keeping it well locked up over the past few years. And so, sure enough, Misato Narukami was no longer anywhere to be found.

His mind finally started to clear as he pieced together what had just happened. He reached for his left shoulder blade, and no snake scales rasped beneath his fingertips—just skin. Ryouji must have brought Shirota into the room only to take him out again. When the image of Shirota casually looped over Ryouji's shoulders came back to him, Misato couldn't suppress the amused smirk that rose to his lips.

Misato had been treating the white serpent as if it were a mere pet of late. At some point, the fact that Misato Miyazawa was a man possessed by a snake had become mundane. It had actually been a long time since he'd been anxious about hiding Shirota or not wanting anyone to see the spirit.

“Those things really came for me, huh?” he said with a self-deriding chuckle. He’d chucked someone very important to him across the room almost like a hysterical child unknowingly wrecking their toys. Worse, he’d seen nothing wrong with that in the moment. Anger welled up inside him as he berated himself.

Somehow he managed to quell his raging heart before sluggishly readjusting his nightclothes. He’d put on quite a pitiful display, that was for sure. In all honesty, he was scared to face Ryouji again, but there was no way he could skulk back under his blanket and just go to sleep. “Right,” he muttered, psyching himself up as he retightened the cord of his kimono around his waist.

He shivered in the wintry nighttime air that greeted him outside his futon, so he picked up the padded kimono next to him before standing and walking across the room. Faint moonlight illuminated the room through the paper sliding door, and with his eyes already adjusted to the darkness, Misato found it was more than enough light to navigate without turning on the lamp.

He slid open the door that led to the external corridor. With the curtains drawn, the corridor was even darker than Misato’s room. He reached for the light switch with the ease of muscle memory, and a dim yellow glow flickered on in response as the old-fashioned incandescent bulbs lit up.

As he padded across the cold, somewhat splintered wooden floorboards, his emotional state began to level out. Misato Miyazawa, who had lost himself and been thrown into disarray, was gradually reclaiming his shape. He lived in the present; he was Misato, an employee of Tomoe Town Hall who rented the outbuilding on the old and large Karino estate.

He briefly combed through his pillow-mussed hair with his fingers before bundling it up with the hair tie he kept on his wrist. He turned left at the end of the covered passageway then proceeded down the inner corridor that encircled the dirt-floored pit adjoining the living room. Across the creaking floorboards and on the other side of the large pit—whose forlorn, frozen air was slightly imbued with the scent of soil—an inviting light spilled from beyond the living room door.

It was around two in the morning, but all the lamps in the living room dazzled brightly, and there was no missing the buzz of the TV. Misato came to a stop in front of the frosted glass door framed with amber wood. He slowly breathed in...then out again.

“...Ryouji, can we talk?” he called through the door.

Instead of a reply, Misato heard the TV audio cut out, the sound vanishing along with the visible glare of the screen. Creaking floorboards grew louder and louder as Ryouji ambled across the tatami mats. The glass door slid open with a clatter, bringing the two men face-to-face.

“Are ya settled down a bit now?” Ryouji asked, his eyes slightly scrunched and swollen with fatigue. His shoulders were adorned with a white-scaled spirit, whose body was loosely wound several times around his neck.

“Yeah... Sorry about that...”

“Nah, nah—not to me. If you’re gonna apologize, first say it to this guy. He’s literally heartbroken,” Ryouji pointed out, thrusting Shiota in Misato’s face. As if on cue, the snake petulantly turned his head away and slinked back to Ryouji.

“...Does he hate me now?” Misato pouted.

“Well, he’s sulkin’, that’s for sure.”

“Huh? Shiota...” Misato said sadly, the serpent’s obvious reluctance tugging on his heartstrings. “I never knew he had such complex emotions.”

“Beats me.” Ryouji shrugged as he stepped away from the door, inviting Misato into the room. It may have been the living room, but it also functioned as Ryouji’s bedroom, making it his own sort of nest or personal stronghold. Piles upon piles of manga magazines and clothing littered the floor around the futon, while a kotatsu strewn with empty cans and food trays occupied the middle of the room like an altar.

Misato had never seen the space without a layer of disorderly clutter. He often snapped at Ryouji to “Clean up for once!” in place of a greeting, but at that moment, its familiarity and lived-in feel assuaged his shaken heart.

“No matter how much this guy nuzzles into my neck, I ain’t becoming his new owner, ’kay?” Ryouji said with a bark of a laugh. “So could ya both kiss and make up already? The sooner the better.” He peeled Shiota’s squamous body off his shoulders and prompted him to twine around Misato instead.

The moment scales touched his skin, Misato could sense just how put out Shiota was; his thoughts seethed with phrases like “*He threw me off. He rejected me.*”

“I’m sorry, Shiota... I really am,” Misato said with an

awkward smile, petting Shiota's pearlescent body. "It's all my fault. But I need to talk with Ryouji first, so you can go back inside a bit later. Okay?"

Merging with the snake was rather an ordeal, and it took some time. Both he and Ryouji had a lot of work to do in the morning, so if they were going to discuss the night's events, they needed to do it right then.

"I had no idea he was such a talker, that Shiota," commented Ryouji as he watched on from beside Misato. He folded his arms, an unreadable expression on his face.

"I wouldn't say he has the vocabulary to properly talk... He doesn't usually put himself out there like that, after all."

The most Misato could get out of Shiota on a daily basis was sort of different tiers of alarm in response to nearby spiritual phenomena. In fact, the only "sentence" he could ever reliably hear was "Snack here now." Shiota liked to nap during the majority of the time Misato spent conscious. And Misato was almost always asleep when the serpent escaped, so it was a rare occasion for them to both be awake and active at the same time. Misato seldom asked for Shiota's help the way he had when they were solving Ryouji's disappearance—and even that was the first instance he'd ever teamed up with the snake in such a manner.

"Ya think? This guy's been chattin' away to me like crazy," Ryouji chuckled. "Yeah, his vocab ain't much, but... Anyway, take a seat."

A seat? Where?! There was so much stuff crowding the room that Misato could spot only Ryouji's futon as a free place to sit. He hesitated; it felt rude to just invite himself onto someone else's bed. In the end, he simply shoved some of the detritus heaped on the floor aside, and Ryouji tossed him a floor cushion to sit on. He visited Ryouji's room with relative regularity, yet the spaces he made for himself were never empty the next time he dropped by. He blew out a long breath as he stuck his legs under the electric kotatsu.

Ryouji caught Misato's eye from where he sat cross-legged on his futon. "So..." he began. "I'm just gonna get straight to the point, aight? Apparently, Shiota knows where Katsuki's gotten to. He said you ignored him when he tried to point it out this afternoon, so he wanted to sneak off by himself to go find him. That's when I found him tryna get out of the house. Any of that sound familiar?"

Misato blinked vacantly. "What? What're you talking about?" The gravity of the situation wasn't sinking in, and he could only frown in a mixture of disbelief and befuddlement. Not much earlier he'd been desperately searching for Katsuki in his dreams, his efforts an aftereffect of the malice that nested in Yasaka Shrine taking advantage of his weak psyche. Of course he'd been concerned about Katsuki's whereabouts deep down, but he hadn't been intentionally looking for his brother then.

Am I still dreaming? Misato had to consider the possibility in his weary state. But then the snake coiled around his neck spoke to him.

"Found Katsuki. Back of shrine. Misato tell me: 'Cut it out.'"

"Ohhhh, *that!*" Misato exclaimed in realization. "I'm sorry... I was kinda preoccupied, so..." Through their contact Misato could sense how distraught Shiota was that he'd been scolded for trying to tell his host something important.

No wonder he was acting so desperate back then.

However, having just been pulled in by the vessel of Yasaka, Misato had resolved to not let personal matters further disrupt his work. He must have suppressed Shiota's will in his attempt to disconnect from his own feelings.

"So, if it was at the place you visited today... He really is on Mount Kagura, huh?" remarked Ryouji, assembling several sheets of paper before handing them to Misato.

Misato looked down at the packet to see a database search produced by his very own place of employment. "Hey... When did you...?" He floundered, confusion clear on his face.

"While you were out on that job," Ryouji clarified. "Unlike those nasty Narukamis, I'm a tax-payin' citizen, y'know? Your manager said he could get me some materials so long as I submitted a request form. I already gave Wakatake a copy, and we were gonna split up and cover different areas on the list tomorrow, but...sounds like I don't gotta worry about that anymore." He interrupted his explanation with a huge yawn. "Ugh. Only got enough time for a short nap at this point," he grumbled, glancing down at his watch.

Misato was genuinely impressed by the speed at which Ryouji worked. "Wow, so Mount Kagura's on this list, too...though I guess that's to be expected. The spiritual energy is strong there. But..." Misato paused for a moment. "I can't help but wonder whether this really is just a coincidence."

When he thought about how his brother was *right there* at the very same place he investigated that afternoon, he was overcome by an indescribable frustration. Katsuki was *right there* and Misato had never realized. And then had been too flustered to listen to the knowing serpent in his gut. He felt like a total idiot for having nightmares about chasing Katsuki when his brother had been *right there*. Misato hung his head in wretched disappointment.

“Couldn’t tell ya.” Ryouji shrugged in reply, downing soda from the plastic bottle on the table between them. “I never woulda guessed he’s travelin’ through nawame. I mean, it’s not like they’re somethin’ you can navigate alone and actually end up where you want to go, y’know? But you put that shikigami on Mount Kagura. I bet that’s what drew Katsuki there.”

He had a point. The doll Misato had used as a substitute for little Haruto was still wandering Mount Kagura.

“Don’t tell me you...you think Katsuki’s looking for...me?” Misato hazarded.

“That’s what Wakatake’s been theorizin’. He was going on about how he can’t think of any reason Katsuki’d run away from home other than for you.” Ryouji was gazing to the side, and the light refracting off his glasses obscured his eyes.

Misato fell silent. He had no idea what to say.

He was looking...for me.

Things were playing out in a dangerously similar fashion to the nightmare he’d just had. He pressed his knuckles against his lips as those raw, ugly feelings reestablished themselves in tandem with the flashback.

Since Shirota had successfully managed to alert Misato to the new information, the serpent had fallen fast asleep around his neck. Nothing but the subtle *tick, tock* of the wall clock penetrated the silence-bloated room.

“So basically, this is all my fault.” It took everything he had to voice that thought aloud. His strained voice met the air like an aerosol emptying of gas.

“What makes ya say that?” Ryouji said with a slight scowl.

“I mean...” That was all Misato could utter before he ran out of steam. He simply didn’t have the energy.

“For one thing, it’s touching that he misses ya so much that he’d do all that, y’know?” Ryouji shrugged again. “I gotta take Wakatake to him cuz that’s what I’ve been employed to do, but I bet

Katsuki would be over the moon if you came to fetch him. You can give him the whole lecture 'bout how much he worried you, never do that again, et cetera, et cetera.” His tone was listless.

Huh. That must be how it seems from a third party's point of view, Misato noted to himself in a daze.

“That’s too good to be true,” Misato countered. “If he’s risking his life to come looking for me more than *five years* since I left the Narukamis, that can only mean his home life is going terribly.”

“Yeah, so that’s *why* he had to go so far to ask his big bro for help. Don’t it make sense?” emphasized Ryouji, nodding.

Misato got the feeling he wasn’t going to be able to get his point across to Ryouji—especially given their respective exhaustion. *That’s not it.*

If Katsuki was lonely, it was Misato’s fault for making him so heavily dependent on his brother. If Misato had really cared for Katsuki, he would have encouraged the boy to form bonds with other people before he left.

But what good will telling Ryouji that do? My personal guilt has nothing to do with him. Plus, I already owe so much to him; I can’t trouble him anymore. But I just...I just don’t know. How am I supposed to fix this without anyone getting hurt?

He felt truly pathetic. The fact that he couldn’t find the right words to say was just embarrassing, too. He gritted his teeth, exasperated with his inability to express himself.

“I’m actually pretty jealous, though,” Ryouji suddenly murmured as if he couldn’t bear the quiet. “I wish I’d had a big bro like you.”

His words fell flat in the cluttered room, the late-night dark encroaching on its walls.

AS far as Ryouji Karino’s memories would have him believe, he’d never really had a blood relative. That was a constant throughout the life he remembered—even after recovering his identity and having his death status corrected. He’d had a family as a small child but didn’t know what they looked like or what their voices sounded like. Not to mention the fact that they were long gone. Even his house had been cleared out years ago, no sign of his older sister or

parents left behind. It seemed as though no one was interested in the young, sole survivor of the tragic river incident, let alone waiting to welcome him back with open arms.

For many people, what they lacked in blood relatives could often be found in adoptive ones. In Ryouji's case, however, it was difficult to say whether his adoptive father was an honest man. The man professed himself a tengu, and Ryouji was actually pretty certain that was the truth. His dad was a rootless, shady type who dressed himself in gaudy Hawaiian shirts that were very unbecoming of his age.

He was quick to hammer necessary incantations and rituals into Ryouji, covering what a novice psychic would need to know for life in the mountains as well as the city. Admittedly, his tutelage was tough, and Ryouji struggled at times. But his dad repeatedly reminded him that it was so Ryouji could "Survive on your own as soon as possible, even if it makes only a few days' difference."

Despite having taken Ryouji under his wing, Ryouji's dad was the sort that never really seemed like he'd be around for long. He would foist Ryouji on acquaintances for the better part of a year, disappearing without so much as a word. By the time he stopped coming back for good, Ryouji didn't have much trouble accepting that it was about time for a change.

So, as someone with no concept of blood relations, the ties that had formed between Misato and Katsuki were absolutely blinding.

The word *ties* had originated as a way to refer to cord or chains, such as those used to tether animals. For some, the ties that existed between individuals were more like shackles: their blood chained them to their family, and they could never truly escape, whether they wanted to or not. Yet, as someone who had no such ties, Ryouji found himself unable to discard the miserable craving for a true family.

"I was far from the ideal brother. It wasn't pretty," Misato mumbled hesitantly, self-loathing entering his tone. He smiled wryly. "All I did was keep Katsuki on a short leash so I could secure my own right to exist within the family." The most sorrowful frown had tugged at Misato's facial features when Ryouji uttered the word "jealous."

"I get that, but I'm still pretty jealous, man. Like...you're genuinely worried about Katsuki, yeah? Relatives that really care 'bout cha like that ain't somethin' you can just magic up."

Ryouji had no doubt that familial relationships weren't all good. In fact, the drama he'd just been watching on TV featured a woman who grew up in a dysfunctional family and eventually decided to cut her parents off. Family was a double-edged sword; it could quickly turn toxic when the harmony was knocked off-balance, and how much a person was loved was determined the very moment they were born. It was totally unfair.

And yet the world brimmed with stories that glorified familial ties. Wholesome, heartwarming fantasies of family. Although most recognized that such stories were no more than idealism, people who'd never experienced those ties often yearned for them regardless. It was impossible to simply erase that desire.

"But your dad took you in and cared for you, didn't he?" asked Misato, confused. "And...even though they're dead now, you *did* have your sister and your biological parents."

"That old man? Nah, it was like he saw me as nothin' more than a stray kitten," Ryouji laughed. "Besides, what's the point of tryna force myself to remember a family I can never meet?"

The only remnant of the Ryouji Karino who was raised on the estate was a pair of festival dolls that had been gifted to him and his older sister, Chinatsu. Unfortunately, even those were lost. After protecting Ryouji from the inugami he'd lured to Tomoe, thus fulfilling their duty, they vanished into Shirota's stomach. The white serpent had eventually vomited up the cursed lucky cat he'd consumed, so perhaps he would regurgitate the dolls as well if Ryouji were to untangle him from Misato's neck and shake him upside down, but...in all honesty, Ryouji wasn't too keen to try.

The clock had long since struck two, and Ryouji's mind and body had been thoroughly battered by a full day of preparations. He had to have been extremely overtired to start ranting about something so pointless and embarrassing while completely sober.

"As someone without any real bonds to speak of, just havin' a brother that worries about you is a blessing in itself, if y'ask me," Ryouji muttered. Sure, Ryouji had *connections*. He'd scraped the surface of closeness with plenty of people. But when it came to terms such as "parent" or "lover" or "best friend," no specific people really stuck out in his mind. They existed only in abstraction.

"Hey... It's not like I have a real bond with him either." Misato grimaced sadly. "I mean, it's been years since I even saw his face.

Back when I left the clan...”

“And that’s why I’m sayin’ you should go pick him up,” Ryouji argued with a sigh.

Ryouji wanted to see Misato celebrate his brother’s safety and scold Katsuki for making him worry so much. Katsuki still had family in Misato, who would search for him and who fretted about him even within arm’s reach. And Misato had willingly left that behind, while Ryouji had never been blessed by a relationship like theirs to begin with. Even so, it wasn’t really envy that made Ryouji so insistent about Misato going to find Katsuki—he just didn’t like to witness people failing to utilize what they already had.

He’d thought the same thing when he battled the inugami. Most people had probably disdained the original host when he had a complete change of heart after discovering the existence of his biological child. But to Ryouji...the man’s dedication to his hitherto unknown son was fascinating.

Misato had descended into yet another session of deep, anxious thought. With nothing else to do, Ryouji picked up the plastic soda bottle on top of the kotatsu. The soda—warmed to room temperature—fizzed with a *pshh* as he unscrewed the cap. Though, really, it was only the kotatsu that was warm; the fan heater was off, meaning that the actual room temperature wasn’t all too toasty. The relative coolness of the sickly sweet liquid soothed Ryouji’s throat as he gulped it down.

“Y’know, I don’t think there’s anyone out there who has a *perfect* relationship with someone. Not to mention you guys had no say over who you hung out with or where you lived as li’l kids,” he pointed out.

For some reason, Misato harbored an awful sense of guilt when it came to Katsuki. It was as though he blamed himself entirely for Katsuki’s troubles, when in reality, Ryouji could only judge the adults in their lives as at fault. Misato had so thoroughly convinced himself that he was responsible for Katsuki’s loneliness that he had edged into delusion—doubtless that was the Narukamis’ fault as well. Misato had been no more than a teenager, after all. A child. No adult in their right mind could’ve genuinely thought that burdening him with the guardianship of an even younger child was healthy for either of them.

I don’t wanna pry, but judging by that Wakatake bastard, that house couldn’t have been a nice place to grow up.

Misato was a victim of that household, too. He'd effectively been forced to play the part of the magnanimous older brother to ensure his survival.

"Yeah..." Misato eventually replied half-heartedly.

Ryouji exhaled a small, gruff sigh. He couldn't think of anything more to say.

After a few moments of silence, however, Misato spoke up again. "I...had a dream," he said. "That miasma from Yasaka Shrine dug up all sorts of stuff from my mind. Stuff I'd forgotten, stuff I'd *tried* to forget..."

"Yeah, but that was a malicious attack from a nasty spirit, y'know? You can't take that crap seriously. Does ya no good." It was highly likely the spirit had purposefully twisted Misato's memories and emotions in order to more deeply wound Misato's psyche and whittle down his control. Shrugging those attacks off was simply part of the job for an exorcist.

"Maybe," Misato answered vaguely. He started to duck his head in a lackluster nod but stopped when he seemed to realize something. "Wait, no... It wasn't misrepresenting anything, really. It was like it...*empathized* with me. Was it trying to use that to manipulate me instead?" He began to mutter to himself before going quiet again—yet there was a look of careful consideration on his face. He brought his long, effeminate fingers to his chin.

No matter what approach the spirit took, the fact that its intentions were malignant still rang true. Ryouji opened his mouth to voice that aloud when he suddenly remembered: if the spirit was attempting to *use* Misato, then with just a little analysis they could work out what it might want.

"It was looking for someone...and it wanted to run after them to catch them. The spirit can't go home anymore, so it wanted the other person to stay with them... Meanwhile, from my point of view, I was chasing Katsuki. But I wonder if there's someone else running around Yasaka Shrine—no, Mount Kagura—trying to find someone in particular..." Misato narrowed his eyes as his fingers trailed upward to touch his lips.

Ryouji was secretly relieved to see him regain somewhat of a fighting spirit.

"Search, chase, and catch. That's exactly the role of the demon in tag, isn't it?" Misato observed. The problem was... Who was the demon? And whom were they looking for?

According to Misato's hypothesis, the demon luring children into the mountains was originally a girl who'd been sacrificed to Mount Kagura. They would have to trace the girl all the way back to the Edo period to identify her and the reason she may have become a demon in the first place, yet they had so few clues that sifting through all of the available documents was going to be a huge undertaking. Not to mention, the task would eat up a lot of valuable time.

"Until fairly recently, the people of Nagaso used to fill a big, straw effigy with adzuki beans and offer it up at Yasaka Shrine every seven years. The effigy is sealed in a wooden box, and the villagers worship it as the deity's vessel. Then, when an oblivious farmer distributed those Nagaso-grown beans to the wider region, some ended up at Tomoe Elementary School," Misato explained. "Basically, the thing that latched onto me is whatever spilled out of that vessel when its box was opened."

"So it's all about the adzuki beans, huh? Funnily enough, those bugs looked like those adzuki bean beetle thingies, y'know?" Ryouji nodded, then paused. "...Eugh. Though just thinking of 'em again grosses me the hell out."

Their scientific name was *Callosobruchus chinensis*, and they were commonly known as the adzuki bean weevil. The moniker came from their pesty nature of laying their eggs inside the beans. Worse, they were barely a tenth of an inch long, and an infested bean could quickly turn an entire storage container into a swarm of beetles.

The memory of the horde thronging around Misato and the door to his room sent a shiver up Ryouji's spine. He'd become almost numb to fear due to the nature of his profession, but he was by no means immune to things that evoked those natural, physiological reactions of disgust.

"So...did ya find out what that effigy thing is? Or, well, who it's supposed to represent?"

Perhaps the straw dummy did start out as a replacement for the human sacrifices they made to the mountains in times of famine. But the intent behind the offering had changed since the demon began to haunt Mount Kagura. Of course, there were other rituals that involved pouches of adzuki beans as a way to ward off evil. Even Ryouji and Misato used them as a way to purify themselves.

“Well, first I checked on a few details with the family that originally supplied the cursed beans to the school, and then we did some research to find out when the first instance of that seven-year cycle took place,” Misato said, his eyes flitting upward in thought. “It really did start during the Great Famines of the Edo period, like we suspected. We got ahold of the death register for that particular year, but... Well, it was right in the middle of a famine. Lots of people died.”

Buddhist temples kept accounts called death registers that noted the Dharma name, and date and age of death, of every deceased member of a family that adhered to the temple. Each individual received their Dharma name from a teaching monk after dying. The Great Famines had earned their superlative due to the sheer number of people who’d starved to death, and the death register from the time most certainly reflected that. It recorded plenty of people fleeing the village, too.

From the register, the Abnormal Disaster Unit had drawn up a list of children under the age of seven that fitted the description of the child who had been sacrificed instead of the usual straw effigy. Then Misato had been urged to leave early and get some rest, so he didn’t know how far his team members had progressed past that point.

“The temple in Nagaso is rather large, so once we found out the year the child died, we managed to find some surviving documents in addition to the death register. Unfortunately, just after the famine settled down, the villagers endured a rampant plague and suffered even more casualties. That must’ve been when Yasaka Shrine was erected. And I think we can assume the symptoms of the curse of the azukiarai directly correlate to that of the plague.”

Nagaso Yasaka Shrine had been constructed with the belief that it could suppress the epidemic that overtook the village as soon as the famine came to an end. At the shrine’s heart, the straw effigy stuffed with adzuki beans served as the deity’s vessel—that deity presumably the erstwhile human sacrifice to Mount Kagura. The dummy’s gut was filled with beans, which bore the malcontent absorbed from the plague afflicting the villagers. In other words, the villagers attempted to pacify the sacrifice-turned-god that tormented them with disease by returning its evil and venerating it at the shrine. It was common practice for Japanese Shintoist groups

such as the Gion cult to worship cursed entities in order to console them and appease their anger.

The cold, quiet night wore on. Nighttime in winter was a mostly silent affair; the croaking frogs and chirping insects were hiding away in hibernation. The ticking wall clock announced each second that passed, the motor in the kitchen fridge distantly whirred from the other side of the glass door, and occasionally the electric kotatsu's thermostat clicked when it kicked back into life. All the sound surrounding the pair was a conglomeration of entirely man-made noise. The season was one of death and slumber, emptying the streets of animals and humans alike.

Misato appeared to be wide-awake, and his alert gaze was trained on his hands. Meanwhile, Ryouji glanced at the clock and prepared himself for the worst—it could end up being an all-nighter. He wondered if he should tell Misato to take the morning off work at least.

“Anyway...” Misato piped up again. “The human sacrifice that turned into the demon of Mount Kagura must’ve been searching for someone but ended up luring all children under the age of seven to the mountain instead. It’ll make for an easier solution if we can figure out why the child became a demon rather than ascending to godhood, but... Hey, Ryouji. Are you and Wakatake going to the mountain alone tomorrow? Well, today.”

“That’s the plan, yeah.” Ryouji nodded. “Guess that means I’ll be chargin’ into the demon’s lair with that guy to keep me company, huh?” He hummed thoughtfully for a moment before a realization struck him. “Speakin’ of which, will Katsuki even be—... Y’know what, never mind. It’ll be obvious enough once I’m actually there.” He sighed and cradled his head in his hands, comprehending anew the many challenges that awaited him.

It was a good thing that they’d ascertained Katsuki’s whereabouts. Truly. However, Katsuki had likely strayed into the same place the “demon” terrorizing Tomoe (or at the very least, the Abnormal Disaster Unit) dwelled.

“I’ll contact Yoshida first thing in the morning and see if we can accompany you,” Misato said with conviction. “We can’t just sit by and twiddle our thumbs if you’ll be going into the heart of Mount Kagura. In fact...I should probably tell Yoshida about Katsuki in the first place.”

“Nah, I don’t think you gotta do all that.” Ryouji shook his

head. “I gave ’em a rough idea of things when I visited the office this afternoon. Anyway, I think it’d be a good idea if you wait until noon at least to drop by. We know where we gotta be, and we’re both real freakin’ low on energy right now. We should sleep before either of us opens ourselves up to parasites again.”

Ryouji recognized he’d bitten off more than he initially thought he could chew, but he just had to take it one step at a time. First, he’d arrive at Mount Kagura, then Misato would act as backup later on. Perhaps Misato was at a point where he was so traumatized by the earlier mental attack that he couldn’t sleep, but Ryouji was majorly flagging. A huge yawn escaped his lips, finally prompting Misato to glance curiously at the clock.

“Ack! Is it that late already?!” Misato yelped, scrambling out from under the kotatsu. “I’m sorry, Ryouji... I didn’t think. I’ll leave you to get some sleep now, okay?”

“Thanks. See ya,” replied Ryouji with a wave as Misato clambered over the clothing scattered across the floor and out the living room door.

AT dawn, Shinichi Wakatake parked his car at the foot of Mount Kagura where the asphalt pavement of the road came to an end. The local Shugendo ascetic that he’d employed had contacted him to say that he’d ascertained the whereabouts of Shinichi’s “master,” Katsuki Narukami.

Apparently, Mount Kagura had been particularly troublesome of late, and the freelance monk had confirmed Katsuki’s presence through an ongoing case concerning the mountain. The young, seedy-looking monk—or Karino, as he’d introduced himself—claimed that it was difficult to enter the preserve without permission from the village council. In spite of his appearance and rough mannerisms, Karino was deeply trusted by the locals and on friendly terms with the town hall. The day after Shinichi hired him, Karino returned with a set of contracts as well as a list of possible sites to investigate. He seemed to be right at home in the countryside, where many general contractors were indistinguishable from gangsters.

The winter solstice was approaching, so it took at least two

hours for the sun to eventually peep above the mountains each morning. Shinichi dimmed the headlights of his car but left the engine running as he stepped out for a moment. The distant daybreak shone in the pale sky, and frost almost seemed to dust the very air itself. His breath came out in white clouds of steam, and each clump of withered grass he trampled with his leather shoes snapped and crackled like thin ice. The area was completely deserted—evidently, the foot of the mountain wasn't patrolled twenty-four seven.

They simply didn't have the time to leisurely wait for the town hall to open its offices that morning, so Shinichi had left the job of negotiating with them wholly to Karino. Karino didn't seem too pleased that he and Shinichi were working separately, but at the end of the day, the problem was that of the Narukami household in Shimane. And the Narukamis had tasked Karino with supplying information only. During a rather heated phone call, Shinichi had firmly reminded Karino to leave the Narukami name out of any discussion with Town Hall. Shinichi's phone had continued to ring incessantly after that, so he'd resorted to turning the power off.

"Honestly. Why on earth did he have to cause such trouble?" sighed Shinichi.

Katsuki Narukami was an unpleasant master to have. There were no issues with the spiritual powers he'd been blessed with at birth, but he was a boy lacking in the composure and discretion necessary to one day lead a large clan. It was beyond Shinichi's understanding why Katsuki wouldn't just think a little more about his position as heir before acting—hence Shinichi's immense struggle to predict Katsuki's next moves.

Even so, it was Shinichi's job to retrieve Katsuki. Shinichi was his tutor as well as his future advisor once he succeeded the head of family. He had no choice but to do everything in his power to support Katsuki and the Narukamis. *Yes, exactly. The advisor to the next head of the Narukami clan...will be me. Most definitely me.*

He wasn't willing to give that position up to anyone. But as he silently recited those words to himself, the face of a beautiful young man crossed the back of his mind.

Shaking himself, Shinichi cut the engine and set foot onto the leaf-smothered mountain trail, a small flashlight in hand. There was supposed to be a small shrine dedicated to the mountain's gods at the end of the narrow, unpaved path, which was only somewhat

wider than a game trail. He was planning to mark his tracks just in case he by some unfortunate event managed to stray into a nawame within that distance.

In truth, he wanted to call for backup from the clan if he and Karino really had located Katsuki. The town hall people would be out in full force by the time dawn broke, however, and he just couldn't afford to linger while someone drove down from Izumo.

The Narukamis had been plagued by scandal for the past few generations. First off, the current head wasn't originally intended to take over the clan; he'd been urgently called home after the primary successor died in an accident. Then there was Misato—the child of the woman he'd been forced to leave in order to lead the family. And when Misato redirected a curse cast upon him and promptly disappeared, he became the biggest scandal of them all. It was a well-known tale within the Japanese community of mediums.

Yet another internal controversy making its way into the public sphere is the absolute last thing we want.

As Shinichi strained his eyes in the moonless dawn that shadowed Mount Kagura, a white shikigami floated past on the other side of the layered vegetation.

Chapter 9: Before Dawn Breaks

AFTER finally evacuating Ryouji's room at around three in the morning, Misato was rudely awakened yet again just before five. Wakatake had called Ryouji to say he'd decided to search Mount Kagura on his own, utterly disregarding what Ryouji had to say. Ryouji then asked for Yoshida's personal phone number, so Misato simply cut out the middleman and called his manager himself.

The night sky was beginning to pale by the time Misato and Ryouji finished informing Yoshida of the situation, and although he'd been ordered to take the morning off, Misato couldn't find sleep again. Given that there was no avoiding a confrontation with the demon of Mount Kagura, he decided to prioritize cultivating a state of mental calm rather than rest or eat.

He changed out of his thick, warm nightclothes and into a thin, white cotton *gyoui*, a type of kimono worn during ascetic training. He returned from the bathroom with a towel around his neck and a plastic bucket in hand, and he left both the paper sliding door and the outer glass door wide open. He stared out at the courtyard. There was a small pond at the back of the snugly designed space.

"A wooden bucket probably would've helped to build the atmosphere a little better," Misato commented to himself with a wry smile. He stepped out into the courtyard with naked feet, the sky still glittering with stars against an indigo backdrop. The thick cloud cover of the previous day had completely cleared away.

The crisp winter air sapped all of his body heat as it chilled with the oncoming dawn. The soil and grass felt like sheets of ice beneath his bare soles. He closed his eyes and took in lungfuls of cold air, slowly composing himself.

"O child of holy Kamurogi and Kamuromi who resides in the High Plain of Heaven, hear this prayer and pronounce thy great, heavenly verse." Reciting the words of a purification rite, Misato submersed one foot in the pond. The thin layer of ice shielding its surface cracked easily beneath his weight. He followed with his

other foot, then kneeled, the frigid water enveloping his legs.

“May the gods of all things listen as closely as the eight-eared deer; I plead that you exorcise and purify till crime bears no crime and sin bears no sin.” His toes sank into the muck at the bottom of the pond. He had barely the capacity to mind its sludgy texture as a numbingly cold sensation close to pain shot through his submerged lower body. At once, his heartbeat raced and his breaths crystallized in shaky gasps.

Suppressing the urge to immediately jump out and run away, Misato concentrated his total being on the pivotal part of the invocation. He used the plastic bucket to scoop up some of the muddied water before pouring it over his shoulder. He proceeded to do the same to his other shoulder. His voice quivered as he spoke, and he did his utmost to pay attention to his rogue, quickened breathing and keep it under control. “O sacred flame, holy water, godly heart—exorcise and purify!”

Deep within Misato’s shivering body, the white serpent nestled comfortably, basking in the shadows and blissful coolness.

“Sorry for ignoring you yesterday,” Misato murmured.

Shirota’s reply came in the form of a sensation; Misato couldn’t make out any word in particular, but he did feel a sense of acknowledgement.

As the mountains eventually awakened to the lightening sky, the tiny, dark presences rushing into the pond from higher up the slope gradually disappeared. Misato scooped up another bucket of freezing water and dumped it over his head. All he could feel was the torturous cold raining down on him—as well as his body’s natural inclination to flee it.

His heartbeat seemed to make his entire body tremble. He and the snake dwelling within him were completely removed from the world around them, their souls left face-to-face inside Misato’s small, thin body. Misato shivered in the cold, while the snake rejoiced at the midwinter weather; they were wholly separate beings, yet their consciousnesses were fused at their very core.

“Shirota... Will you help me?” Misato addressed the spirit, visualizing the serpent as he closed his eyes. The image of Shirota in his mind soon sprang to life and slinked out from behind him. He reared his head, facing Misato directly.

The huge serpent was part of Misato. The parasitic spirit, which had once attempted to consume Misato, had a dark history:

in preparation for the curse, it had been forced inside a jar alongside several other snakes under the premise of “eat or be eaten.” The remaining snake that had devoured all of its brethren was none other than Shiota. He’d become somewhat of a manifestation of Misato’s primal urge to cling to life and absolutely reject the prospect of being consumed by another.

In other words, to ignore Shiota was to turn his back on himself. No wonder he’d lost sight of himself and been so readily possessed by a malevolent entity.

“I’m easily influenced by all sorts of things and lose my bearings all the time. I make a lot of decisions based on making a good impression at work, just getting the job done, my friends, or my family. I’ve no doubt that if I face another cunning spirit in the future, they’ll immediately try to take advantage of that. But Shiota...” He paused for a moment, then continued softly, “None of that can lead you astray. You—my very core—want to live. You’re always thinking of how to survive—nothing more, nothing less. I’m really, really sorry for refusing to face you properly all this time. From now on, I’ll take every signal you send me very seriously. I trust you more than anything, after all.”

Shiota simply stared back at Misato with his steady, crimson eyes; he couldn’t just open his mouth and begin to speak, of course. His forked tongue merely flitted out from time to time to taste the air. Misato reached out to gently touch the snake’s head, his fingertips brushing against the glimmering, pearl-gray scales. He picked up only one word in reply.

“Okay.”

Misato’s body had one drive that it would never abandon: to live. His body obeyed Misato’s will and served as vessel to him alone. No matter what, his body could never truly oppose Misato’s existence or deny him survival. His core self was the only thing he could always undoubtedly count on.

As such, it had the power to forcibly remind him of things he’d forgotten after becoming too wrapped up in his day-to-day worries. Perhaps Shiota had used that power to try to help him—the serpent might very well embody his selfhood, after all.

“Thank you for putting up with me, Shiota.” Misato smiled, and the snake spirit slithered over to nuzzle his host before disappearing back inside his body.

IT was six o'clock in the morning and the Abnormal Disaster Unit was holding an emergency meeting more than two hours before the workday normally started. The office was occupied by five people: Toshimi Yoshida, the manager; Ookubo, who was heading the Mount Kagura inquiry; Tsujimoto; Asaka; and Ryouji Karino, who happened to be cooperating with the unit since his investigation coincided with theirs. As for Misato Miyazawa, the man who was officially in charge of the overarching demon case, Toshimi had received word that he was physically unwell and told him to rest at home instead.

"Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for coming in so early in the morning," Toshimi began in a formal tone. "As you should know, there's been an urgent development in the Mount Kagura case. First, I'd like for us to pool together all the information we have, then devise an appropriate response. Karino, we'll start with you—could you give us a detailed rundown of what you know?"

Toshimi had called the meeting immediately after Miyazawa called his personal phone about one hour prior. Both Ookubo and Tsujimoto lived in central Tomoe, and it took them less than ten minutes to drive to the office. Asaka, on the other hand, was from a part of town that had become the jurisdiction of Tomoe during more recent municipal mergers, so her commute clocked in at forty minutes. Still, Toshimi was sure that if he showed any special concern, she'd simply laugh it off and delight in the fact that "There are barely any traffic lights or other cars on the morning country roads!"

"Gotcha," Karino said with a nod. "Hi guys. Bit late to properly introduce myself, but I'm Ryouji Karino, and I'm your Miyazawa's housemate. He's got me up to speed on everythin' that happened with the Mount Kagura case up 'til yesterday evening. Meanwhile, I've been pursuin' a missing person, and turns out he's lost somewhere on Mount Kagura, too. To be clear, the missing person is Katsuki Narukami, Miyazawa's younger brother. The Narukamis asked me to take care of it on the down low, but the whole thing's gotten pretty serious. I personally concluded that sharin' information between us will give Katsuki a much better chance."

Karino had dressed himself in as equally obnoxious attire as

always, but on closer inspection, Toshimi noticed that he was definitely dressed for work. His cargo pants were made of strong fabric and actually came down to his ankles for once, his bright orange puffer jacket would stand out among the foliage on the mountain, and his shoes were specifically designed for hiking.

The office was shrouded in near darkness in its position on the third floor of the main building. The sun hadn't yet risen above the horizon, and there was no other source of light aside from the half-blocked window. The five meeting attendees huddled around a table in the middle of the room while the buzz of people beginning their mornings resounded in the far distance.

Sitting in Miyazawa's chair, Karino provided a general overview of everything that had happened the night before as well as earlier that morning. He recounted how Miyazawa had come into contact with malicious adzuki bean weevil spirits as they surged forth from Yasaka Shrine's vessel. Evidently, those same weevils had managed to possess Miyazawa, giving him bad dreams as well as the ability to sense the demon of Mount Kagura.

In addition, Miyazawa's "pet" snake had sensed Katsuki Narukami's presence while at the shrine, and Karino had passed the information on the boy's whereabouts over to the man who'd contracted him—Wakatake. Wakatake's actions had brought a new level of urgency to the case, though Toshimi had already heard most of the other details Karino related from Miyazawa himself over the phone.

The shikigami Miyazawa had planted on Mount Kagura was keeping the demon entertained, and Miyazawa was also the only one to have earned the Sugihara household's trust after handily resolving their problems in person. Unfortunately, the unit couldn't afford to give him the full day off. And Karino's plans also included Miyazawa, no doubt. That said, considering what had happened the previous day, Toshimi was very intent on granting Miyazawa as much time as possible to recuperate and focus on his body and soul.

"Seems like Wakatake's turned his phone off and everythin', so I'm not gettin' through to him at all," sighed Karino gruffly. "He told me to keep Katsuki's case a secret from you guys, but that's prob'ly 'cause he ain't got a clue Misato 'Narukami' is workin' here. Not to mention I'm Misato's friend; I ain't gonna rat him out to someone like Wakatake. The bastard's convinced himself Misato's the one who lured Katsuki out here." He snorted, tapping

Miyazawa's desk in frustration. He couldn't conceal the stifled anger in his voice. "If he finds out Misato works here, I'm pretty confident nothin' good will come of it. Nothin' at *all*."

Toshimi nodded in agreement. Miyazawa was his subordinate. It didn't matter what had happened in the man's past. In the present, however, he was an employee of Tomoe Town Hall and—most importantly—the future of the Abnormal Disaster Unit.

Wakatake had apparently blurted out a string of one-sided instructions before hanging up on Karino, not letting him get a word in edgewise. The tutor knew nothing of the extent of the challenges in seizing Mount Kagura. Concerned about the mess Wakatake might create, Karino promptly woke Miyazawa just after he'd finally fallen asleep following an hour or two of restlessness. Then they had contacted Toshimi.

Sitting in front of Karino, Tsujimoto released a light sigh and removed his glasses. He pinched the bridge of his nose, a frown on his face. As Miyazawa's doting mentor, Tsujimoto was probably feeling quite sorry for the young man. It seemed as though the Narukami family had come to disrupt his life yet again—despite his escape from the clan.

The day before, Toshimi had just heard all about Miyazawa's situation from Karino when the man in question returned to the office. Upon seeing Miyazawa's pale face and anxious expression, Toshimi had opted to send him straight home (although it was past seven o'clock by that point, anyway). Miyazawa was by no means to blame for not realizing he'd been possessed by the miasma back at Yasaka Shrine; no one else had noticed either. They'd all missed the signs, so Toshimi and his other colleagues were somewhat at fault, too.

"Understood. Thank you very much, Karino." Toshimi nodded gratefully, pulling himself together. "Now I'd like to discuss what we decided on after Miyazawa went home yesterday evening. As Karino should also be aware, we were puzzling over who the child that was sacrificed in place of the straw effigy might be, as well as the circumstances that led to it becoming a cursed demon rather than a deity," he summarized. "Well, we combed through the records for the years when a human sacrifice is presumed to have been made, and identified a child that fits the criteria. Her name was Ofusa and she was six years old. But, looking at the documentation, we couldn't see any obvious reason why her

sacrifice might have failed.”

“What records were these? A death register? So, was there something written about this kid in particular?” Karino asked, slumping back in his chair and folding his arms.

“We found mention of her in a series of letters between Nagaso’s village headman and the temple the girl’s family frequented—they had the death register. Publicly, her disappearance was treated pretty much like a missing persons case, but the letter from the village head tells of how she climbed the mountain and became a goddess of mercy. He also asks the temple to recite a sutra for her,” Toshimi explained. “But strangely enough, this was several months after the date we suspect she was actually sacrificed. In the same letter, he asked to be introduced to an ascetic who had a talent for quelling plagues. Judging by the date, the epidemic was already ransacking the village. And...”

Thus far, he hadn’t revealed any truly noteworthy findings. All they’d done was unearth the name of the sacrificial victim. That was a helpful discovery, of course, but the *really* juicy information lay in Toshimi’s next words.

“There’s actually another record of Ofusa’s death not long after the day she was sacrificed—and this one was sent to the temple from another location entirely. It was a letter stating that the owner of a travel permit issued by that temple had died abroad.”

Karino, who had leaned forward at some point, propped his elbow up on the desk with his chin in his hand. “Interestin’,” he hummed, pushing his sunglasses further up his nose. An Edo-period travel permit was a lot like modern forms of ID cards: it was a document issued by temples to their parishioners that allowed people to leave their villages for travel. “What happened there, then?” he questioned. He furrowed his brow and tilted his head to one side. “D’ya think she ran away and someone else took her place?”

Toshimi nodded, a wry smile on his face. “Probably. Perhaps Ofusa just ran away, and no one wound up being sacrificed, but... well, that’s gotta be wishful thinking. We probably wouldn’t be having this meeting if that were the case.”

It was plausible that Ofusa had only pretended to go along with the sacrifice while someone arranged for her escape. Therefore, the demon of Mount Kagura was very likely whoever took Ofusa’s place. They couldn’t get much detail out of the

available resources, yet given that the temple had two different records of Ofusa's death, its members should have been able to work out that someone had swapped places with her. That they hadn't implied that an authority figure within the village personally lent a hand in Ofusa's getaway.

"Ya mean the human sacrifice hauntin' the mountains ain't Ofusa, then. Got any bright ideas who it might actually be?"

Ah. *The vital question.* Unfortunately, the team hadn't uncovered any concrete answers as of that point.

"Hmmm..." pondered Karino in a low-pitched drawl, mulling it over as his eyebrows creased further. He crossed his arms again, his knee bouncing up and down. His pale irises focused intently on the space in front of his faintly tinted sunglasses, until finally, he stopped *humming* and abruptly opened his mouth.

"Hey, so... Did that Ofusa kid have any brothers or sisters? Misato said he could feel the demon of Mount Kagura searchin' for someone as well. Hearin' about what happened to Ofusa, I think there's a good chance that demon's lookin' for *her*," he proposed. "The demon might've been forced to replace Ofusa, so now they resent her and want to put her back in her rightful place or somethin'. That's what I thought at first, anyway. But if that were the case...why would Misato empathize with them so much? I mean, he's a professional exorcist. Even if he was feelin' down about Katsuki, there's no way it shoulda been that easy for anythin' to possess him. Misato himself thinks it's sorta strange, too. He was all like, 'Perhaps the demon of Mount Kagura is in a similar position to me,' and—"

RIIIING RIIING.

A loud, shrill ringtone cut him off mercilessly. Karino patted down his pockets in panic and fished out his phone. "It's Misato," he said with a quick glance at the screen, his expression stern. He glanced up at Toshimi and gestured at the device, wordlessly asking permission to answer it.

Toshimi nodded in reply.

"Hey. What's up?" Karino said, putting the phone to his ear. "...Yeah. Hope ya don't mind that I'm usin' your desk. We're in a meeting right now... Huh?! You're kiddin'! ...Right, gotcha. I'll put Yoshida on. Here ya go, manager." He grinned slightly and proffered the phone to Toshimi as if he were one of Toshimi's employees.

Toshimi took the cellphone and quickly held it to his ear, adopting his best phone voice. "Hello, Miyazawa? What's happened?"

"Sorry to interrupt, manager, but I have something to report. You know the shikigami I left on Mount Kagura? Well, someone destroyed it. I have no idea who did, but as a matter of urgency, could you please ensure Haruto's safety? Also...I'd like to ask your permission to come into work. I want to be on the scene myself."

There were supposedly only two people at Mount Kagura beside the demon stirring up trouble in Nagaso: Katsuki Narukami and Shinichi Wakatake. And Miyazawa reported that someone had purposefully caught and destroyed the shikigami he'd created.

Toshimi covered the receiver for a moment as he ordered Asaka to contact the Sugiharas and check on Haruto. Though general administrative staff, Asaka was fully capable of doing tasks like chaperoning clients and conducting welfare checks. "Sorry about that, Miyazawa. All right. Now that our workload has significantly increased, I think I've gotta ask you to come in. Is that okay with you?"

The Mount Kagura situation was evolving into a real emergency, and it would be hard for the team to properly devise a solution without Miyazawa. But they'd be in even deeper water if his mental state led to yet another possession.

Miyazawa's tone was clear and determined on the other side of the phone in response to Toshimi's hesitant request. "Yes, that's completely fine. By the way, I seem to have a few things in common with the demon of Mount Kagura. I felt it when I encountered it yesterday. Plus, my little brother's on that mountain. I want to find him myself, and...to be honest, I think the demon will come straight for me if I'm the one searching the mountain for Katsuki. When that happens, I'll be ready. This time, I'll work my way into *their* state of mind," Miyazawa said with conviction.

Toshimi closed his eyes and listened very carefully to each word Miyazawa uttered. He strained his ears, alert for any indicators of Miyazawa's mental state in his voice and manner of speech. Eventually, Toshimi concluded that Miyazawa was feeling extremely calm. "Gotcha. By the way, Miyazawa...what have you been doing since you called at five o'clock this morning?" Toshimi was relatively certain a little sleep couldn't have had such an impressive effect on the young man's emotional wellbeing.

The reason Miyazawa supplied for his change in demeanor made much more sense: “Oh, um...just some ablutions.”

“And are you feeling a lot calmer now?”

“Yes,” he replied firmly, without hesitation.

“In that case, get to the office as quickly as you can while still driving safely. Asaka’s on her way to keep an eye on Haruto, so don’t worry about him.”

After they exchanged brief goodbyes, Toshimi hung up. He handed the phone back to Karino with a polite bow of his head.

Karino peered at him curiously. “Did Misato say somethin’ funny, manager?”

Evidently he’d been smiling.

“No, no,” Toshimi denied. “I was just thinking...they didn’t call him the Snake Eater for nothing. Even after being possessed and clawed at from within by an evil spirit, he’s still not the type of kid to give up.”

Miyazawa was the last person who’d succumb to anything that threatened to crush him from the inside out. Beneath his gentle, awkward exterior dwelled the true Snake Eater—a man who fiercely clung to his desire to live above all else. The way he refused to bend to anything that threatened him would surely come in handy in their line of work.

“Where’d that come from?” Karino asked with a quirk of his eyebrow. “But sure, you’re right. He’s actually pretty protective of his pride, that Misato.” The smile on his face was satisfied and bashful, almost as if he himself had been complimented.

AFTER finishing his ablutions and warming his frozen body in the shower, Misato was suddenly struck by a strange ripping sensation deep inside him. It was the feeling of his shikigami being destroyed.

“It’s finally time, huh?” He steeled himself as he turned off the stream of water raining down from above and scraped back his dripping hair with his fingers. He gathered it together at the back of his head and tied it with the hair elastic on his wrist. Water droplets splattered to the floor with each movement of his head.

His body had pretty much completely regained its warmth. He left the bathroom with the sole intent to notify the Abnormal

Disaster Unit of the development as soon as possible. He nimbly wiped his body down in the dressing room, then headed straight for his phone. His call wouldn't connect to the office phone outside of working hours, so after a little thought, he decided to call Ryouji instead.

As expected, everyone was gathered at the unit office, so he was able to communicate the news to them without any issue. He also received Yoshida's consent to go into work without much persuasion, so it wasn't long until the conversation ended.

"We have a few things in common, huh...?" he muttered as he stared at his phone screen in a daze. He'd never changed the default wallpaper. The top of a hill framing a star-filled firmament shone back at him.

Misato didn't have any recollection of ever wanting to observe the night sky for himself. When he thought of stars, the accompanying memory was always that of a young voice issuing from about a head below him describing the constellations and facts about space. He could almost feel the heat of a small hand relentlessly grabbing his own as a past Misato kept his eyes trained on the ground, watching that the child didn't trip; Katsuki's gaze never left the heavens, after all.

In the dead of winter, Misato had always hovered around the boy to make sure he didn't catch a cold, while in the height of summer, Misato slathered him with insect repellent so he didn't get stung or bitten. Those idle memories mingled with every rendition of the starry sky Misato witnessed.

I can't go home anymore. And if I can't, then he can't, either... Oh. That's what it is. That's how I was feeling that one night.

One day, when Misato had grown sick of the world of the living and found himself longing for the realm beyond, his young brother begged him to go see the stars. So Misato clasped his hand and guided him onto a bus with no return journey. He ran away from home, repurposing Katsuki's pleas to watch a meteor shower as an excuse to get away. At the time, he was enticed by the idea of just disappearing once and for all and taking his beloved brother along with him. That dark, desperate desire was very similar in feeling to the nightmare the demon had shown him the night before.

He remembered Katsuki, the little tyrant, simultaneously dependent on him and willing to ruthlessly boss him around.

Siblingship was a strange thing. Misato had both controlled his brother and been controlled by him, though in different ways.

I think that demon's looking for someone they have a similar relationship with, so I should— Oh. Before any of that, I should get dressed.

The cold beads of water trailing from his hair to his skin brought him hurtling back to the present. He turned toward the clothes basket that stood next to the washbasin, then stopped when he glimpsed his reflection in the large mirror above it. A painful smile stretched across his lips as he noted the rather hideous dark circles under his eyes and the sickly pallidness of his skin. But fortunately, the strife and controversy in his life wouldn't go on for much longer. Hopefully.

He loosed his hair and retied it once more before getting dressed. The lengthy strands stuck together in one, long lock that brushed against his spine. They caught on his shoulder blade where skin turned from soft flesh to hard scales. He twisted in front of the mirror to look, and his gaze settled on the uniform, rhombus-shaped patch of scales on his left upper back. He ran his fingertips across it, the resulting sensation somewhat like touching someone's nails. His reflection beamed back at him, displaying the evidence of non-humanity on his skin.

The man with long hair and snake scales was undoubtedly Misato Miyazawa. He existed in a world far detached from normality and could hardly be classed as fully human. Such was the insecure, ambiguous state he'd lived in over the past few years. Even so, he didn't regret choosing that path; it was far preferable to being strangled to death as Misato Narukami.

What burdens would he continue to carry on that scaled back? What would he call himself? As of yet, he didn't have the confidence to state exactly who or what he was.

Then who or what do I want to be when I ascend Mount Kagura?

"I'm a Tomoe Town Hall employee. And...I'm..."

Katsuki's brother.

He wasn't sure whether Katsuki would refer to him thus anymore, but even after abandoning his identity as a Narukami, he had never once wanted to stop thinking of himself as Katsuki's older brother.

Truthfully, I wanted to be at his side forever. I never wanted to let him go...and that's why I tried to take him with me that time. But in the

end, I left him with them and went to lead another life in another place. I'm sure that was the right thing to do. We can't be with each other anymore. But even so...

"Wait right there, Katsuki. Your big brother's coming to pick you up."

No matter whether Katsuki hated him or criticized him for everything he'd done, Misato was determined to climb that mountain and bring him back to the world of the living. Even if their relationship used to be something dark and twisted that he utilized in order to make Katsuki dependent on him and to secure his place in the Narukami family, wanting to be Katsuki's brother in the present was right. And no one was forcing it on him.

This time, it's completely my own decision. I want to be there for him. That's why I won't back down.

Misato was going to protect what he wished and employ everything in his power to make up for lost time. He wasn't going to impose his reason for doing so on anyone else either.

The night's last moments finally passed, giving way to the edges of the sun.

KONOMI Sugihara was in the middle of hanging laundry outside when the landline began to wail at a ridiculously early hour. Tomoe was relatively cold on winter mornings compared to other towns in the area, and on some days, it seemed as if the damp laundry might just freeze the moment it was hung up. She only noticed the phone was ringing on its last chime, right as she entered the house through the back door clutching an empty laundry basket.

Late-night and early-morning phone calls were rarely ever a good sign; calls that needed to be made so urgently were usually to inform people of an emergency. In a panic, she hurriedly returned the laundry basket to the dressing room and walked briskly to the phone in the living room. If it was a genuine call, she was sure it'd be no time until they called again.

The phone set began to flash in the corner of the room, signaling that someone had left a message. Barely anyone ever used their answering machine, so it took Konomi a while to actually work out how to play it back.

“Hi there. My name’s Asaka, and I’m from the town hall’s Abnormal Disaster Unit. I’m awfully sorry to call you so early in the morning, but there’s something I’d like to check as soon as possible. I’ll be leaving the office now to talk to you in person. Before I arrive, would you be able to keep a very close eye on little Haruto? I’ll be with you soon. Thank you.”

“Oh no,” Konomi gasped, her voice quivering with a sense of foreboding that she couldn’t fully comprehend. Her heartbeat quickened. She shakily put the receiver down and rushed toward Haruto’s bedroom. On the way, she caught sight of the back door ajar. Evidently she hadn’t closed it properly in her haste. A shiver ran up her spine.

No, no. First I just need to check his bed.

At least, that was the thought that crossed Konomi’s mind before she changed course. If she left then, she might still be able to see his tiny figure in the distance. She slammed the door open and flew out of the house, propelled by fear.

She turned to the mountain her son always used to wander toward when he was still having those horrible episodes—but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Haruto!” She ran, doing a lap around the house as she shouted his name. Eventually she tired and stood in front of the back door in a daze.

When? When did he leave? I was right outside the house the entire time...unless... Was it when I forgot to close the back door? Even so, he should still be nearby, and... Wait, I still need to do a full sweep of the house.

Konomi walked back into the house unsteadily, dizzy as she covered her mouth with her hand. Her husband was there waiting for her, still in his pajamas as he ushered her inside.

“What’s goin’ on this early...?” he yawned.

“Oh, honey,” Konomi said, her voice still wobbly, though her tone was a little more hopeful. “Where’s Haru? Wasn’t he asleep with you?”

“No...?” her husband, Shunsuke, replied, shaking his head with a look of confusion. “I mean, you called him, didn’tcha? I thought he—... Wait...don’t tell me...” Within seconds, Shunsuke’s face paled in realization.

That time, they both dashed out of the house, paying no mind to what the neighbors would think as they called for Haruto in

desperate, echoing voices. Yet Haruto was nowhere to be seen.

They had to wonder how on earth his little legs had carried him so far so fast. The most likely route he'd taken was the small, narrow path that wound up to the shrine located behind the residential area. Konomi stared up the sheer incline. She considered the plaza and the shrine where the stair ended. Shunsuke was already walking in the opposite direction in search of Haruto. *Should we go back and climb it?*

It wouldn't be long until the woman from town hall arrived—though perhaps they could turn to her for ideas.

Konomi clenched her fists, still trembling. "Why?" she croaked. *What have we ever done to deserve this? Why us?*

The theory the specialist had given her was so absurd that deep down she could never accept it. Even so, she'd listened in the hope that it would bring an end to her suffering. No matter what she thought of it all, the important thing was to get her son away from danger. But danger had stolen him back again.

She took off at a sprint, still in her slippers. She was wearing only a winter apron on top of her thin loungewear, but she didn't have the time to go back and fetch a coat. After navigating the linear streets of the residential neighborhood, she raced up the slope that abutted an old house. She crossed in front of the community center, then scrambled up the steep, stone steps on pretty much all fours until she reached the little shrine whose purpose she didn't really understand. She'd never participated in any festivals there; in fact, she didn't even know if the shrine hosted festivals at all.

She eyed the diminutive building, its appearance plain and undecorated. There was a collection box for monetary donations placed at the entrance, but otherwise nothing about it stood out. Except...that wintry morning, the doors were wide open as if to welcome shrinegoers inside—although no priests regularly worked at the shrine, as far as Konomi was aware.

Haruto's got to be in there!

Driven forward by that gut instinct, Konomi stepped into the shrine unfalteringly, not even stopping to take her slippers off at the entrance.

Chapter 10: Tag, You're It

“HE got away.” The girl sulked in disappointment. Evidently, the “demon” she said she’d found in the outside world had managed to shake her off after she tried to manipulate him.

Katsuki breathed a sigh of relief, taking care not to let the girl see. The black cloud of ominous mountain air she controlled was truly dangerous, and he hadn’t thought for a second that the person she possessed would get away safely. Tragically, the spirit didn’t appear to understand that she was harming others—nor did she intend to hurt them—which elicited a melancholic sadness deep within his chest. The darkness that constantly lingered in all four corners of the shrine was so inky black that he could hardly believe it originated from the innocent girl in front of him.

“What were you going to do if you *had* called him here, anyway?” Katsuki asked her. He had to wonder whether she’d been slipping through the barrier around the mountain and interfering so intrusively in the human realm before he arrived—and for how many years?

“Well, Ofusa won’t come out no matter how much I call for her, so maybe she went home by herself without telling me. But I can’t get back down the mountain without finding her, so...” She pouted. She seemed to realize that she couldn’t leave the peak, and in her mind, that was because she was supposed to be the demon in their game of tag.

As far as Katsuki could determine, however, the real reason was slightly different. *I don’t know what happened to her, but somehow, it seems like this kid’s essentially the master of this mountain. I mean, there’s a shrine intended for a human sacrifice out here. That probably means there’s a town or village at the foot of the mountain that used to follow the custom of making child sacrifices and worshipping them as gods.*

Although the girl thought of herself as the demon in a game of tag, she was actually a human sacrifice harboring all the spiritual energy of the mountain. And because she was its guardian, she was

quite likely completely bound to the mountain due to the mystical barrier surrounding it.

If she was properly sacrificed, her soul should've become one with it and disappeared. Maybe this girl was involved in some kind of accident... In a successful sacrifice, her flesh would have returned to the soil, while her soul would have assimilated with the environment and become the very mountain itself. Instead, the girl was stuck in limbo, forever doomed to seek her sister in a never-ending game of tag.

"Do you often, uh...look for demons in the outside world and try to use them like that?" Katsuki hazarded.

"Nope, not at all. That's the first time I've ever sensed another demon! It was reaaaally easy to get to them, too, but...oh well."

In other words, there had probably been someone nearby that she could relate to. They must've been searching for someone as well.

I still can't sense any malice from her... She's really not that bad. Maybe she'll see what she's doing more clearly if I can get her to remember her name somehow.

If only there were a way to overwrite the identity she'd assumed; she could stop conceptualizing herself as a demon and instead view herself as just that—herself. At the very least, she'd stop crying out for Ofusa if Katsuki could put an end to her game. Perhaps then she'd be able to peacefully settle down and truly become a god of the mountain.

Whether a demon or an older sister... I know that's not all she's ever been.

It was certainly strange how fearsome and sinister the energy she used to manipulate people was—especially when her personality was so pure. Katsuki was also surprised by how well the person she'd afflicted had managed to evade her grasp.

Well, knowing that Misato's been involved with the case, I bet the local exorcists are aware of this spirit and doing all they can to combat it—including Misato. Now that she's been interfering with the living world, they're probably drawing up some kind of countermeasure... In which case, it wouldn't be long before Katsuki had a chance to escape. It was only a matter of how exactly he would utilize that chance—and unfortunately, Katsuki wasn't really sure what to do.

It's possible they'll just seal her—and me—away without even considering that there might be more to her situation.

From the average person's perspective, the girl was a rather significant threat to the local community. At that very moment, the mediums may have been devising a strategy to better restrain the spirit before sealing her forevermore inside a cursed object. Either that or they were planning to cut her off from the source of her spiritual energy—the mountain—and make her disappear completely.

Katsuki had a different idea: if possible, he wanted to convince the exorcists to comfort and appease the spirit rather than simply eradicate her. It was far too cruel for the girl to end up imprisoned or annihilated after spending more than a hundred years alone in the mountains, perpetually waiting for the conclusion to a game of tag that never began.

Katsuki had grown up being told by his family and tutor that he was overemotional, too impulsive—but he just couldn't bring himself to condemn someone who'd become a monster due to misfortune and decades of solitude. Mostly because he was a hair's breadth away from heading in the same direction himself at any given moment. For example, had Misato been colder toward Katsuki as a child...or if nobody ever cared for him again, not even his brother... Well, Katsuki could easily imagine going insane and falling into ruin.

The girl had given up on luring the "demon" into her domain, instead leaving the shrine to start looking for Ofusa again. Katsuki followed after her, his eyes drawn to the sky above as he emerged outside.

As always, it was blanketed with a white-lined darkness, and neither sun nor moon was visible through the thick veil. And as far as Katsuki could tell, night never happened. He had no idea how long it'd been since he first wandered into the mountain or whether his internal sense of time actually correlated to its passage in the outside world. Even so, the thought didn't bother him all that much.

If continuing to live in that twilight realm meant he'd eventually meet his brother again, he had no desire to return home. He wasn't afraid of being punished by his parents or tutor; no matter how much he disobeyed them or how badly he behaved, the Narukamis still *needed* him to be the next head of family. They had plenty of demands to voice about his personality and mannerisms, but at the end of the day, it wasn't what was important.

If he had just caught that shikigami when he first spotted it, he

probably would have already reunited with Misato.

Katsuki kept his eyes and senses thoroughly peeled for the shikigami as the girl walked around calling for Ofusa. The route the paper doll patrolled was pretty much unchanging, so to a certain extent he could rely on his inner clock to track its vague location, and then watch out for its presence. He descended a gentle slope in the general direction of where he thought the shikigami might be.

He froze. Something wasn't right.

He spun around. "What...?" Katsuki's eyes widened, raking across his surroundings for the source of the sudden strangeness in the air. But as far as he could see, nothing had changed.

Am I imagining things now? Great.

He began to walk again, only to root himself to the ground when he noticed a slight breeze whisper past his cheeks. It was that of a cold winter chill—something that shouldn't have been present in the confines of the cursed mountain. "Is there a rift in the barrier somewhere?" he murmured to himself. Either it had formed naturally, or someone had forced their way through.

Doing his best to suppress any feelings of impatience or hope, Katsuki turned his attention back to the shikigami. It was gone. No matter how long he loitered on its path or how far he followed its trajectory upstream, the paper doll was nowhere to be found.

"Are you ready?" echoed the girl's voice through the air.

"Not yeet!"

Katsuki heard another voice shout out in reply—and it was coming from the same direction the wind was blowing from. It was the high-pitched voice of a very young child, and...the shikigami was nowhere to be found.

"Crap!" Katsuki gasped, retracing his steps in a panic. *Maybe the shikigami got blown over this way instead*, he thought. But he couldn't shake the fear that it was the very same child responding who'd been protected by the shikigami in the first place.

"Hey, where are you?! Could you come with me for a moment?" Katsuki called to the girl, hurriedly climbing back up the mountain to where he'd last heard her voice.

Suddenly she appeared before Katsuki, intrigued by his booming summons. Her own calls to the child ceased—for the time-being, at least. "Katsuki? What's wrong?" She blinked, seemingly totally oblivious. She stood atop a small ridge halfway up the slope. She looked at him curiously.

Katsuki exhaled in relief before quickly realizing he would need to rack his brain for an excuse to distract her for a while. "O-Oh, well, um..." he stammered. "Oh, right. I forgot something back at the shrine. I don't really like going in there alone, so would you come with me to get it?" He made a show of patting down his pockets as he sheepishly asked for her assistance.

She tilted her head slightly in confusion for a moment, but... "Okay," she said with a nod before turning on her heel.

The girl spent the majority of her days playing with Katsuki of late. Gradually, she had begun to devote fewer and fewer hours to searching for a little sister who couldn't play with her and more time relaxing with Katsuki. Perhaps that was a sign that she was starting to trust him.

I need to reduce the amount of time she spends as a demon in that game of hide-and-seek as much as possible, Katsuki theorized. He had no idea whether lessening her tendency to see herself as a demon would free her from the curse that bound her, though.

The edge of a card brushed Katsuki's fingers as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. It was the postcard he'd brought with him in order to trace his brother's presence. Unfortunately, the urgency of the situation he'd thrust himself into meant tracking Misato down would have to wait.

I need to see him. Even if it's only once. Please. He repeated that small prayer to himself as he caressed the soft texture of the cardstock.

"Here we are!"

With just a few steps, the two of them seemed to suddenly materialize in front of the cavern and shrine.

"Thanks." Katsuki nodded, then ducked inside the shrine alongside the girl before posing a question that had just occurred to him. "Hey, so...you know how you were calling for Ofusa again just now? Have you ever actually played a game of hide-and-seek with anyone up here?"

It was likely. Misato would have had no reason to put preventative measures in place if nothing ever happened to the village at the foot of the mountain before then.

Then what happened to the children that did respond to her calls?

"Yeah, I have, but...even if I find them, they always disappear." She pouted, staring down at her shabby zori sandals.

"They...disappear?" Katsuki echoed hesitantly.

The girl gave a small, self-assured nod. “Yup. I find their hiding place, then we start playing tag, but...as soon as I touch them, they just fade away like *pshhhh*,” she described, gesturing with floaty hands. “It’s like they melt and disappear.”

“Oh...” Katsuki replied. *That would explain things*, he added silently.

The girl was currently the guardian of the mountain, but when she first arrived there with Ofusa in tow, they were both regular, human children. There was a popular adage in Japanese folklore: “Until the age of seven, children are in the hands of the gods.” The saying suggested that a child’s very life was at the mercy of the divine until they grew old enough to assimilate into the world of the living. Basically, in the spiritual realm, young children were already considered semi-supernatural beings. As such, their sense of self was shallow and vague. The moment the girl’s spirit touched those children, her godly fingers consigned their souls to become one with the mountain beneath their feet.

“Hey, there’s something I wanna talk to you about. It’s a bit serious, so please just listen closely, okay?” Katsuki finally said as both of them stood inside the shrine.

The girl peered up at him with perplexed eyes. The haggard, underdeveloped girl’s hair was tied in a ponytail and in a terrible state of disarray. Her kimono was frayed and worn, too. It was obvious that her circumstances were due to a heart-wrenching mixture of starvation, poverty, and ill fortune. Katsuki couldn’t believe there was a soul in the world who could look at her and see her tragic life as anything but unfair—no matter the angle.

Therefore, Katsuki was truly reluctant to impose reality on her little bubble. It broke his heart to bring her more cause for sorrow after all she’d experienced in her lonely existence.

But that doesn’t mean I can let her claim any more victims. The poor girl gained nothing by luring children to the mountain, catching them, and then unwittingly consuming them. That only yielded more despair.

“Listen... The person who answers you when you call isn’t Ofusa. She’s somewhere she can’t play tag with you ever again.” Katsuki spoke slowly, kneeling to meet the girl at eye level. Her brows knitted together in suspicion as she stared back at him. Her expression indicated that said she couldn’t even fathom what he was saying. “Outside the barrier more than a hundred years have

passed since you and Ofusa started playing tag on this mountain. Ofusa isn't here anymore."

"Why not? She always plays tag with me," the girl countered, her voice slightly raised in anger. The shadows lingering in the shrine began to stir uneasily, responding to her change in demeanor.

"But you realize that she's already climbed down the mountain and left, right? The flow of time here is different from the outside world—and you've been here for a long, long time, haven't you? You might not know how long it's really been, but...it's long enough that any human would have passed away generations ago. Sadly, that means Ofusa has already gone to the Other Side, too."

It wasn't quite correct to say she was on the "other" side when technically they were all on that side at that moment, but the girl would know what he meant. He said it firmly, holding her gaze.

The girl took a shaky, disbelieving step backward with something like fear in her eyes. "What're you talking about? Ofusa was the one who said we should play! She said, 'I'll go hide, so you wait right there!'" the girl insisted. "I'm always the demon when we play. She asks me to play all the time, so I just go along with her. She's pretty selfish, but I still play with her because I'm her *sister*. Plus, Mom tells me to keep her busy and keep an eye on her." Her young voice was sharp with emotion. The darkness shifted, creeping closer. "So why...why would...?"

"Please, please don't be upset. Let's think about it calmly, okay?" Katsuki was simultaneously pierced with guilt for distressing a small child and alarm at the danger facing him in the shadows. But there was no turning back. Katsuki, on his knees, carefully reached out for the girl in an attempt to soothe her.

Come on. You're not a demon, and you're not just Ofusa's sister. Please remember... If only he could address her by her actual name; maybe that would change things. Katsuki gritted his teeth in miserable frustration as he softly touched the girl's shoulder with his fingertips.

She flinched wildly, flying backward as though his touch had scorched her. Slowly, fearfully, she backed up against the shrine door, then pushed it open and darted through. She sprinted away, her bare feet pounding against the mountain soil.

"No, wait!" Katsuki cried, running after her. The darkness lurking in the shrine streamed out after him, a tremendous *whoosh*

rattling through the structure as it chased after the girl. The pitch-black haze seemed to mass together and dance through the air over his head like a swarm of insects. It split in two, and the two groups sped ahead of Katsuki in different directions.

“Where’s it going?!”

Katsuki panicked. *Should I go after it? But which way?* He hesitated, coming to a stop as he debated what to do next. The image of the girl’s hurt and bewildered expression crossed his mind.

“A one-sided game of tag, huh...?” he murmured to himself.

It was an abnormal instance of the game—the girl was pursuing someone who didn’t exist anymore. Katsuki couldn’t say in truth that he didn’t relate to her efforts, and that fact shook him to his very core. He had to wonder whether Misato had ever truly *wanted* to be his brother. The role might have been forced upon him, shackling and tormenting him for the entirety of their relationship.

Damn it—now’s not the time to stand around and self-reflect! I need to go after her as soon as possible!

He shrugged off his hesitation with a resolute shake of his head, then sprung forward in the same direction that the bleak wind blew.

THE fleeting flash of white Shinichi caught sight of amid trees cloaked by the dark before dawn was, no doubt, a shikigami conjured by a psychic.

He followed it, desperately clawing his way into the thick of the mountain. When he first detected its presence, he thought it possessed Katsuki’s familiar air. However, after chasing the shikigami down with his every sense on high alert, he recognized that its aura was slightly different. Unlike Katsuki’s dynamic, powerful, and—regrettably—unbalanced energy, it had a somewhat quiet, cool aspect.

Oh my... That’s most certainly Master Misato’s presence!

Shinichi was more convinced than ever that his theory was right on the mark. Katsuki’s half-brother Misato, who had vanished five years before, was the one pulling the strings behind Katsuki’s disappearance.

I cannot let that shikigami escape, he thought with newfound resolve. He strode between the trees, dressed in clothes unsuitable for hiking as he sought the shikigami's location with all his might. He latched onto its floaty, wandering projection and curved his way around the boulders and trees that stood fast in his way. The ground was uneven, and his shoes were uncomfortably slippery as he trod over strata of mushy leaves. The longer he struggled forward, the brighter the horizon began to glow in the distance.

When he glimpsed it again, he strained his eyes to get a better look at what kind of shikigami it was. The shikigamis employed by the Narukami clan were uniquely fashioned: the conjuror used a lock of their own hair as the basis for the body, braiding it together with *washi* paper. There were a variety of ways to knot the fibers, and each method granted the shikigami a specific utility. It was a secret art passed down exclusively to direct descendants of the Narukami lineage.

Of course, originally, it was an art permitted only to those in line to become the next head of family. It's sacrilege for a man who can never be the head to employ such a technique.

Swallowing down the acrid taste crawling up his throat, Shinichi focused all his attention on the shikigami in front of him. He observed that it had been molded into the shape of a human. Before Shinichi could determine its purpose, the small paper doll suddenly began to shimmer like a fading flame.

"A nawame?!" He stared, watching as the shikigami fluttered through a rift between realms, the path leading to the Other Side.

This nawame must be where Master Misato is hiding him.

Shinichi charged toward the vanishing shikigami, determined not to lose track of it. The sleeve of his jacket caught on a branch, the seam tearing with a clean *rrrrrip*. Then, as if to add insult to injury, thorny vines tangled around his feet, making every step forward an arduous task.

"I won't let you get away with this!" he barked.

Sheer panic prompted him to reach out for the shikigami—toward the rift in time and space—without thinking. He could feel his fist close around something. At the very same time he clenched his fingers, the substance of the air changed around him. What should have been the cold, midwinterly air of early morning abruptly turned warm and comfortable, completely enveloping him. He'd traveled through the nawame. He was on the Other Side.

“What have I done...?” He slowly opened his hand to reveal the shikigami he’d been pursuing. It was crushed and crumpled, its shape lost. Consequently, Misato had more than likely registered his presence. He may have ruined his original plan, but from within the nawame he could trace either Katsuki or Misato directly.

The world around him was clear, although the sky above was painted white as if with mist, and it was dense enough that he couldn’t tell whether dawn had yet broken. The stagnant air made the temperature tepid, the space surrounding him seemingly devoid of time or season. Only the trees remained in the same withered, wintry state as the living realm, along with the fallen, moldy leaves forming a thick layer over the ground.

His first priority was to find Katsuki.

Shinichi dug a hand into his breast pocket and pulled out a geomantic compass as large as his palm. It was a tool usually used in feng shui, and the compass itself was embedded in the middle of a board detailing twenty-four directions. The board encircling Shinichi’s had been modified for use in divining a person’s location and bore a piece of paper with Katsuki’s name and date of birth at its bottom. The compass was supposed to rotate to point in Katsuki’s direction.

Shinichi heightened his senses for any sign of Katsuki’s energy while he cautiously proceeded further into the strange world before him. The compass needle was pointing toward one of the mountain peaks. Shinichi began to climb in that direction, but it was impossible to follow the needle exactly since he was entirely unprepared for the alpine environment.

Trees, rocks, streams, cliffs, and other obstacles hindered his way. Even the vines and vegetation that appeared easily trampled were full of unwelcome thorns and branches, thus resulting in multiple dead ends. And in his stiff, uncooperative clothing, he couldn’t move as desired. He ascended only to descend and turned right only to turn left, endlessly circumnavigating his goal. He couldn’t determine how to get anywhere near the top of that slope. Impatience slowly snowballed within him as he single-mindedly forced his way deeper into the mountains.

Then, he noticed something.

The ground beneath his feet was engulfed in shadow.

He was on the Other Side. Shadows weren’t supposed to exist there; it was neither light nor dark, and the light that did exist

didn't seem to come from any discernible direction or source.

Shinichi came to a standstill, immediately suspicious. Until that point, he'd been pinning his frantic glare on just his destination, but then he thought to look up. A huge pine tree towered over him. Evergreen needles adorned its branches, two of which diverged from the trunk about two heads above him. Right in the gap between the boughs...something lurked there, casting that black, stygian shadow.

The creature was long, colossal, and obsidian, and horribly slimy where it coiled around the pine tree. It crept up the branch's length and reared its head, its legless, unsightly body rippling unsettlingly. Its inky body was subtly patterned with a slight mottling that glistened liquidly on its scales as it slithered along, their shine almost wet. A visceral disgust crawled up Shinichi's spine.

It was a snake.

Shinichi stumbled backward a couple of steps in fear, but then somehow managed to steel himself. There was no way he was going to turn back. If that snake lay there in ambush, Katsuki was being kept very close by.

"I *knew* it was you, Master Misato!"

Misato Narukami was a monster who'd consumed a venomous snake spirit and incorporated it into his being. He was a devil child whose mere existence stirred up trouble in the Narukami clan.

How on earth did my lord permit something so reprehensible to run free?! Perhaps it was out of lingering affection for the woman he loved. Possibly, he was fonder of his illegitimate child than the one born of a loveless marriage that had never entered a honeymoon phase.

The snake assessed Shinichi, its triangular head angled downward. Its vertical, needlelike pupils stared him down from the center of fiery red eyes as its black, forked tongue flitted out. Its head remained fixed at that point in the air while its thick body independently wriggled up the pine branch.

Chk-chk-chk-chk-chk. The high-pitched noise of something vibrating against a hard object at high speed suddenly began to echo around him. Simultaneously, one side of the pine tree began to tremble, leaves and pinecones crashing to the forest floor. The intensity of the shaking grew and grew until all the trees in the vicinity started to quake and shudder. The black serpent was

rattling its tail against the trunk of the tree menacingly, openly threatening Shinichi.

“*Hck!*” he yelped. “Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen!” Chanting, he tucked his geomantic compass away and drew a pair of daggers from the holster slung over his jacket. He quickly sliced one of them in the *kuji-kiri* pattern: five times horizontally and four times vertically. An electric *snap* resounded through the air, and the snake’s head jerked backward with the impact. It bowed its neck in a display of anger.

Shinichi poised himself for attack, scowling at the serpent in distaste as he readied his two blades. “Heh...! To think you would be reduced to no more than a monster in the end,” Shinichi spat with a huff of derision.

The snake’s humongous jaw unlatched at the same time, its fangs laden with a surge of venom. Its gaping maw closed in on him, and he recited again, “*Om mayuri krante svaha!*”

With a nimble sidestep, he dodged its lunge by a hair’s breadth and swung the dagger in his right hand upward, aiming for one of the serpent’s beady eyes. He thrust the blade into its blazing iris with a sharp shout...but before he could properly lodge the weapon in the creature’s flesh, its whip of a tail came snapping down on him from above. And though he used both of his hands and the daggers to shield himself, the serpent’s herculean strength was more than enough to send Shinichi flying.

He just about managed to break his fall as his body violently slammed against a nearby boulder. Adrenaline partially masked his pain as he got to his feet.

Meanwhile, the serpent simply glowered down at Shinichi from that same spot on the pine branch, showing no signs of dismounting any time soon. Relieved to see it unmoving, Shinichi relaxed his guard for a split second—only for the ground to immediately begin to undulate beneath his feet with an earth-tearing rumble. Something was pushing up from underneath the mat of decaying leaves.

What is that?! Roots? No...they’re snakes!

The roots of the tree had morphed into ten or so snakes, which all burst forth from the soil in unison and dove at Shinichi, carrying with them the rich, mildewy scent of the mountain. He slashed his daggers wildly, swiftly decapitating each head that advanced.

He glanced up at the serpent responsible for them in the tree.

The creature was opening its gigantic mouth over and over again, ominously baring its venomous fangs from its comfortable position far out of Shinichi's reach. Within moments, the ground roared beneath his feet again, and a new onslaught of snakes broke free.

They're never-ending!

Panic clouded his reflexes for an instant, creating the perfect opening for a snake to spring upon him from behind and wrap dangerously around his face.

"AGH!" he yelled as scales overwhelmed his vision, his balance thrown completely off-kilter. He reached up to wrench the repulsive, slimy, crawling sensation off his face and neck, dropping the pair of daggers in his grip.

While he struggled to peel off the snake that was tightly wound around him, the others seized the opportunity to twine around his legs and arms one after another. They slithered and wiggled inside the hem of his trousers, inside his collar...until, eventually, his entire person was writhing with snakes. Abruptly, he felt a pricking pain in his side, then within seconds, a searing agony spread throughout his whole body.

He'd been bitten.

His shock and fear left him gasping and unable to think straight, the pain dulling his mental processes. *I don't believe it. After everything...have I lost? Did I fail?*

Rather than a dread of death, what flashed through his mind in that moment was an image of his parents, the disappointment and frustration on their faces unmistakable as they sighed at him. He could make or break the Wakatake family's reputation depending on whether he was appointed as Katsuki's closest aide. He'd been raised with that specific role in mind.

If only Master Misato had never existed...

No—deep down, he knew. He hadn't the faintest clue how to treat children, and Katsuki had always been utterly beyond his control. When Misato first arrived at the estate, Shinichi was honestly relieved that someone else could take over playtime with the young infant. The reason Katsuki refused to open up to Shinichi after Misato's departure was totally the consequence of their poor relationship; it had nothing to do with Misato.

Even so, that boy is nothing but trouble for the Narukami clan. That's the truth. It's the irrefutable truth.

That was why Misato had been fed that curse and eradicated

from the family. It was in the clan's best interests.

No matter how much he resents or detests me, this is all his fault. His very existence is a threat to us!

His vision was pitch black. A scorching, pins-and-needles sensation was numbing his limbs. The sound of his racing heart throbbed in his head.

None of this is my fault!

Amid the blackness before him, Shinichi could make out the silhouette of a boy wearing a school uniform. The boy had his father's iron-straight, jet-black hair and skin so pale that he looked almost transparent. Shinichi knew him all too well. His obsidian eyes pierced everything with their frigid gaze, and a crisp, cold aura mysteriously swelled around him.

The boy opened his mouth to say something.

Shinichi scrunched his unseeing eyes shut and covered his deafened ears to ward off whatever awaited him.

In the next moment, his consciousness succumbed to darkness.

SHINICHI awoke with a jolt. The rustling of trees fluttered in the air around him. When he surveyed his environs, he found himself under a murky cloud of white mist. Its paleness amplified a dim glow that came from no visible light source.

He was on the Other Side of Mount Kagura. "...I must've fallen over as soon as I passed through the nawame," he grumbled to himself. If he was remembering correctly, he'd grabbed the shikigami on a spur-of-the-moment impulse just as it passed through the rift. He looked down and unclenched his right fist to corroborate that assumption, but...there was no trace of the shikigami. Perhaps it had slipped away after all.

My head's heavy...and I have a feeling I just had a terrible dream. But no—that makes no sense. There's no way I'd relax my guard and fall asleep in such a ridiculous place as this.

He'd ventured into the mountains where Katsuki had been discovered and had ended up finding Misato's shikigami instead. He'd pursued it with single-minded determination, then followed it into the nawame just moments prior. At least, that was what he thought had happened.

He stood, brushing away the dirt and leaves stuck to him. “Master Katsuki and Master Misato have to be here somewhere...” he muttered. To return home without saving his master and future clan leader was out of the question. And in order to save him, Shinichi had to locate Katsuki and defeat the culprit that had locked him in the ghostly realm in the first place.

“Master Misato...” Shinichi bitterly uttered the name of the boy that plagued the Narukami family and had ultimately become no more than a monster himself. He glared up at the sky, his senses wholly concentrated on seeking out Misato. The boy’s presence was strangely intense, and Shinichi triangulated his enemy’s location almost immediately.

He marched in the direction of Misato’s energy. Meanwhile, a dark haze began to inchingly coil around him like a hungry snake—to which Shinichi was completely oblivious. In his eyes, all that surrounded him was stagnant mountain air.

KONOMI rushed into the small structure of Yasaka Shrine.

After doing a quick search of the interior, she slipped straight out the open back door and into the heart of the mountain. She thought the unseasonably humid air that enveloped her a little strange, but she was too focused on sprinting down a game trail she’d spotted up ahead.

“Haruto! *Harutooo!*” she called over and over as she recklessly dashed through the trees. She had to stop when she eventually ran out of breath. Her shoulders heaved and she doubled over with her palms on her knees. Her lungs complained with each wheeze, the ache stretching all the way to her overused throat. She coughed.

“*Hgh—!*” She flinched, pressing a hand to the accompanying pang that flushed through her stomach area. A nigh unbearable itch burned across her entire body, and an electric current of pain zapped right down to the very tips of her toes, that awful rash its epicenter.

“Why...?” she lamented in a pathetic, croaking voice. *What has our family ever done to deserve this?*

They’d merely eaten some mochi her beloved son had made at school. They hadn’t known that ingesting adzuki beans would cause

so much suffering. In fact, as someone who wasn't from Tomoe, Konomi had never even been given the opportunity to find out—until it was too late.

A hammering pain started to assault her head in response to her lack of oxygen and overheating core. Struck by a sudden despair, Konomi fell to her knees as if her body were genuinely crumbling away.

She'd hastily crammed her feet into a pair of slippers before leaving the house. Exposed to the elements, they were coated in dead grass, twigs, and grass stains. Konomi wasn't sure whether the all-consuming, itching pain was caused entirely by her rash or whether the trampled grass plastered all over her lower body was irritating her skin, too. Sweat trickled down her brow, and she grimaced at the disgusting sensation of wet, disheveled hair clinging to the base of her neck.

However, at that moment, Haruto was far more important. She wouldn't find him by continuing to haphazardly run around a mountain that didn't even have proper trails. "I need to do something...but *what*...? Wh-What should I do...?" She quivered, her thoughts spinning in circles.

She fantasized about tying a string around Haruto that she could just reel in any time she didn't know where he'd gone. She'd thought about putting him on a leash plenty of times whenever he meandered off and vanished into thin air.

People love to say that there's a special bond between mother and child, but...when push comes to shove and we get separated, it makes me realize just how powerless I really am. There's nothing connecting us at all.

Ever since their family fell into this nonsensical mess, she'd worried incessantly about whether she'd gone wrong somewhere along the way. That little, self-deprecating voice that berated her ability as a mother lurked constantly in the corner of her mind. It felt like the whole of society was talking about her behind her back. It felt like her parents and parents-in-law were secretly badmouthing her, too. Not to mention she was probably the hottest topic of gossip among her enigmatic neighbors as well.

I know those people from the town hall will help me look for him, but I still can't rest easy.

After their sudden call the previous day, the team from Town Hall had a better idea of what was wrong with Konomi. Rather than

the young man with long hair from before, a slightly older man and a middle-aged woman had given her some advice. They went out of their way to arrange a special appointment at Tomoe Central Hospital for her, where she'd been able to see a doctor.

Her relief in knowing what caused her illness had decreased her anxiety by about thirty percent, yet the heavy knowledge that her family's spiritual woes were far from over meant that seventy percent of that anxiety was still very much there. Even so, she'd believed that all she had to do was listen to those government workers and her problems would go away—especially since the issue was to do with her instead of Haruto that time. She could probably trust in them again; they'd be able to do something about Haruto's disappearance and the absurd condition affecting him that hardly seemed real.

With those thoughts in mind, she somehow pulled herself together and managed to climb to her feet. She heard a crinkling noise issuing from her apron pocket. Curiously, she reached inside and discovered a creased piece of paper.

"Oh. This is what Shunsuke was looking at," she remarked as she unfolded it. It was the printout the young man had given her on his first visit. Haruto had stopped wandering off ever since the long-haired man put some preventative measures in place, so she'd never thought to read it.

Her husband, however, was rather interested in its contents and often walked around the house with it in his pocket. "I know it's weird occult stuff, but seein' as weird occult stuff is actually happenin' to us, it might actually help," Shunsuke had said when he explained why he was trying to commit the charms to memory. Konomi had stuffed the paper in her pocket that morning when she found it in a pair of Shunsuke's pants that she was about to put in the washing machine.

Can normal people like us really do anything with this...?

Konomi didn't really believe in ghosts and such. Even though one was apparently physically harming her, she couldn't feel satisfied with the questionable explanation that her problems were all because of some cursed entity or the supernatural or whatever. If people could solve things just by saying a few words and wishing them into reality, the world would be a more peaceful place. And even if that *was* the case—no matter how unbelievable—surely eccentric people like that mysterious young man with the long hair

were the only ones who could wield such power.

The top of the document read *“This information is for anyone who finds themselves troubled by something not of this world.”*

It went on to say...

“Please feel free to ask anyone at the Abnormal Disaster Unit about any worries you may have. Our specialists will endeavor to solve whatever problem has been causing you trouble. It’s of the utmost importance that you calmly listen to the unit employee’s instructions to ensure your personal safety. No matter what has happened, we always try to consider the physical and mental well-being of all citizens concerned. In order to keep yourself and the people you love safe, please pay close attention to the following pieces of information.

“1. Living people are much stronger than any other entity. If whatever you’re faced with cannot be classified as a living person, recite this fact to yourself with strong resolve. There’s nothing at all that can win against the will of a living, breathing human. This is vital in ensuring your safety, and panicking and acting recklessly will only have the opposite effect. Do everything you can not to lose sight of yourself.

“2. Don’t let other people influence you. People uninvolved with your case may speculate and give you misguided advice. Although they may simply want to help, there are times when interference can only harm you further. Even if someone is your close relative or spouse, your situation is absolutely no concern of theirs.

“Abnormal disasters can’t be analyzed with objective means, so there are a lot of things that only the people affected can truly understand. The one suffering and struggling is you—not someone else. Don’t be misled by uninformed counsel from other people. It is most important that you do only what you think will keep you safe.

“Another important thing to remember is that the situation you’re experiencing is, in the end, not remotely your responsibility. You might find yourself feeling sorry for or pitying the spirit, yet that doesn’t change the fact that their problem is presently threatening your life. You’re responsible only for your own well-being and physical safety—nothing more.

“3. Accept that unexplainable things do exist. It’s very common for people to search for someone to blame when faced with an abnormal disaster. Whether you blame yourself or someone else, that accusation is based on the belief that cause and effect must exist.

“People tend to think that bad things happen as a result of bad

actions, but in reality, bad things often happen to completely innocent people. Don't feel like you have to rationalize why you've been dragged into this situation; an investigation into the cause will be methodically carried out with the assistance of a specialist after any immediate danger has been neutralized. That way, we can prevent the problem from recurring.

"Sudden, inexplicable events just happen sometimes. And when they do, we should try to approach them calmly rather than placing arbitrary blame on anyone or anything.

"4. Your determination will become the driving force in solving this problem. The specialists from the Abnormal Disaster Unit will help you with your case. Please listen closely to their instructions and prioritize your safety. Then, fill your mind with the desire to see the case resolved and really picture what life will be like once things return to normal. The strongest weapon against a formless, faceless entity is the strong will of a living human."

Plip.

A droplet splattered onto the paper and wetted the thin page. It was followed by another, and another—and it wasn't sweat. Konomi sniffed deeply, a truncated sob escaping her lips. "Don't let other people influence me... They're right," she sniveled.

It was her little family that was suffering—not the neighbors, nor Konomi's parents. As she realized that anew, a stream of tears began to cascade down her cheeks.

That young man with the long hair was the first person to genuinely listen to how I was feeling about it all. He even said, "That must be really uncomfortable for you." He never judged us.

When he gave her the sheet of information, she seemed to remember him saying, "It's difficult to feel powerless in a crisis that's directly affecting you. When those feelings get the better of you, I really recommend having a read through these." Thus, the first page was full of advice on how to approach spiritual encounters, and at the bottom it instructed her to see the reverse side for some simple charms.

Konomi wiped away her tears and inhaled shakily as she turned the printout over. She scanned the sheet for the section labeled "Retrieval" and started to read the charm written there out loud. "Umm..." she ventured hesitantly. "He who flees...know that your path leads only to darkness... Return to whence you came..."

A-vi-ra...hum...kham. He who flees, know that your path leads only to darkness..."

She closed her eyes and clasped her hands together as she chanted with newfound determination. After a few moments, the form of a child aimlessly roaming ahead appeared in the twilight behind her eyelids. She knew that silhouette anywhere; she could confidently say that she'd seen it every single day of his life and far more often than anyone else in the world. She silently called to the small figure, *Come back to me! Stop walking and turn back around! I'll meet you there, I promise!*

All of a sudden, the likeness of Haruto pattered to a stop in the gloom. Konomi's heart screamed her son's name while her lips continued the incantation.

Haruto!

"Mommy...?" a tiny voice said in reply to her silent scream.

Konomi threw her arms in front of her, desperately chasing after his image. Her eyes jolted open with a snap. An unobstructed path seemed to have opened up before her very eyes, the trail marked with tromped-down grass. Not a single tree hindered her way.

The path led to Haruto; Konomi was certain of it. She dashed forward, launching off the grassy earth, her conviction unwavering.

I won't let anyone else get in my way. I'm the one who knows how to protect the people I love. My business is no one else's concern, and other people's business is none of mine. All I have to do is protect him and get him to safety!

She sprinted after that clear vision of her young son. At some point her headache, fatigue, and full-body itch had totally subsided. All that was left was the long, straight path she'd forged for herself.

Chapter 11: Reunion

KONOMI raced up the gently sloped trail with a composed, single-minded determination. She put a little more power into her strides when she saw that the incline evened out up ahead. Haruto was right where that flat ground was; she was weirdly sure of it.

The top of the slope gradually drew nearer, and Konomi could glimpse the surrounding scenery over its crest. Overcome by a sudden surge of feeling, she impulsively ran up the rest of the incline. She emerged into a small, level clearing where the knee-high grass and scrub were seasonably withered and lifeless.

She tried to shout for Haruto only to realize that she didn't have enough breath for her voice. She leaned over for a few moments, wheezing and puffing as her lungs bemoaned her body's overexertion. She couldn't even close her mouth.

Even so, Konomi forced herself to look up, unable to bear the thought that Haruto might escape her again if she was but a second too late. Stalks of dead grass impeded her vision, and for an instant, a fear that no one was there at all niggled at her gut. She turned her attention back to yelling her son's name in an effort to shake off the sinking feeling.

"Haruto! *Harutooooo!* Haruto!" she cried. It wasn't a call to check whether he was there or not. She *could* and *would* summon him there—no matter what.

A rustling amid the long, wilted grass caught her attention, and she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye. "Haruto?!" she gasped, willpower alone propelling her feet forward. She unsteadily stepped into the brush. The sound of dry vegetation being trampled crackled in the distance, and a figure slowly approached with unmistakable intent.

"Mommy!" exclaimed a high-pitched voice that could only belong to a child.

"Haruto!" she sobbed, sinking to her knees when she at last laid eyes on him safe and whole. She threw her arms wide and Haruto flew into them. Her hands patted at his head, shoulders, and

torso as if to check that he was real and all still there. His body heat, his heartbeat, his breath against her neck... Those signifiers of life finally assured Konomi that yes, there was another person there with her, and yes, he was still flesh and blood.

"Oh, Haru..." she sniffled with a rueful sigh. "I'm so glad you're safe. Are you hurt at all? Let's get you back home, yeah?" She spoke to him as though processing the situation, stroking the back of his round head over and over again. His tiny fists grabbed at her apron as he nuzzled his head into the crook of her neck with as much force as his small body afforded him.

And then the dam inside Haruto burst, as if reality had only just sunk in; he wailed and cried and keened, his sobs echoing around them as an intense trembling racked his body. "Mommyyyyy..." He howled right in her ear as loudly as he possibly could.

Konomi gave a half-hearted smile and tugged at Haruto's tight embrace, somehow managing to peel his arms off her. She got to her feet and immediately clasped his hand in a firm grip. "I know, sweetheart, I know. Let's go home now," she soothed. Haruto was far from done with his crying fit, however. He mercilessly wrapped his arms around Konomi's legs and squeezed, clinging on for dear life. "Hey, Haru, ouch! Come on, honey, you're clinging too tight. There, that's it," she protested lightly.

She worked herself loose, securing her freedom once more, then turned them both around to retrace her steps down the mountain trail. Their journey would be downhill, unlike before, and the ground uneven; navigating the terrain while keeping hold of her son was going to be rather painstaking. Not to mention, for some reason, the visibility of the surrounds was poor compared to her trek up.

After a few steps down the winding path, a white butterfly fluttered up to Konomi. She thought it a little strange to see a cabbage butterfly in such a mountainous area. It followed her, dancing to and fro in the air.

Just as it was starting to creep her out, a young man's voice resounded from farther down the slope. "...ra! Sugiharaaa!" Perhaps it was that man from Town Hall?

"Konomiiii!" She recognized the second voice as that of her husband.

"I'm here!" she shouted in reply, suffused with a visceral sense

of relief. The cabbage butterfly flitted away, toward the voices. "It's Daddy, Haru!" she excitedly told Haruto. "Come on, you call out to him too, yeah? Daddy! We're here!"

"We found them!" the voices exclaimed in the distance, and a flurry of hurried footsteps approached. Konomi could see silhouettes through the trees.

"Shunsuke!"

"Daddy!"

The two of them called out to Shunsuke repeatedly as they descended the mountain one step at a time.

A small, black insect flickered before Konomi's eyes, and she swatted it aside with a quick wave of her right hand. But it was soon joined by a second, then a third. She froze, unsettled by their persistence. They relentlessly buzzed around both her and Haruto's faces as if to impair their vision on purpose.

Abruptly the air seemed to shift, their surroundings becoming noticeably darker. Konomi scanned the area around them but couldn't pinpoint anything that had actually changed. It was only when she urged Haruto to quicken his pace that she realized—the trail was gone. And her husband was nowhere to be seen.

"No..." Konomi murmured in despairing disbelief. A creeping sensation up her spine made her shudder. Her fear of an unsettling entity that pursued them from behind and her shock at how the environment had changed in the blink of an eye combined into an overwhelming sense of terror. With each shiver, the full-body aches she'd totally forgotten about came flooding back.

"Mommy?" Haruto asked, concerned.

"It's okay, honey, everything's fine," she answered, more to herself than anyone else. "Daddy will catch up to us soon." She squeezed Haruto's fingers tightly, focusing on the warmth of his tiny fist. Her eyes dropped to their overlapping hands, and she did a double-take at the sight of the big, purplish-red welts rising on the back of her own.

"*Eek!*" she yelped, releasing Haruto's hand and leaping backward. The moment she noticed the wound, a rushing pain flowed into the back of her hand and a swelling heat blazed across her skin. She shakily brought her hand to eye level to take a proper look. Bulging, dark red spots marred her flesh, their centers raised like puffy blisters. All of a sudden, one of the blisters popped before her very eyes, and a grain of something tumbled to the ground.

It was an adzuki bean.

“N-No... I... What’s happening to me?!”

Her neck, her waist, her thighs—her entire body was overcome with that same burning sense of doom. She instinctively scratched her cheek, and something fell from her skin when her nail touched its surface. She caught the object automatically and found another adzuki bean in her hand. It squished readily between her fingers, the flesh spurting a deep red pus.

Panic and horror consumed her as she hastily rolled up her sleeves and pulled the neckline of her shirt down, watching in quivering dread as her body rained adzuki beans upon the earth from one welt after another. Latching onto his mother’s fear, Haruto began to wail once more, shakily tugging at Konomi’s apron.

“Found you.” A bitter mutter suddenly sounded from behind them, at an alarmingly close proximity.

Konomi whirled around. She blinked in confusion until she glanced down to see a small girl standing there. The child wore a tattered kimono that made her look as if she were about to star in a historical play. Konomi stepped forward at once to physically shield Haruto with her body.

“I knew it. You do love Ofusa more than me, don’t you, Mom?” the girl’s hollow voice droned. A black fog began to swirl around her.

Konomi collapsed to her knees, unable to endure the encroaching heat that made her whole body ache and throb.

“Ofusa...” the girl continued, slowly advancing down the slope toward her. “Why won’t you play tag with me? Why’d you go back to find Mom by yourself? I was waiting for you this entire time because *you* said you wanted to play. I even agreed to be the demon...” The vortex of black mist began to pulsate, and cries seemed to echo from within the haze.

“N-No!” Konomi begged, holding Haruto’s trembling form in her arms as she stared at the girl. “You’ve got the wrong child! Believe me!”

“Why...? It’s always, *always* about Ofusa...never *me*...” the girl growled, swinging to face Konomi head-on. She balled her hands into fists and opened her mouth to let out an ear-piercing shriek. “Ofusa!”

The black haze bellowed, its ferocious currents roaring as a horde of black beetles swooped down at Konomi. She cringed, on

the verge of letting her eyes shut completely. Then...

“O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind! Kyuu kyuu nyo ritsu ryou!”

A white swallow darted into the cloud of darkness, cutting right through it as a clear, cool voice commanded the air.

KATSUKI sprinted aimlessly in search of the girl. He stopped when he suddenly heard a woman’s voice—it sounded as though she was desperately calling out for someone. He changed course and headed in her direction instead. Hers wasn’t the girl’s high-pitched voice—no, she sounded much more like a grown woman and was likely a regular citizen. Her desperate cry was probably a result of straying too far into the mountains and getting lost in the spirit world. And if Katsuki was on his way toward her, the girl was most likely beelining there, too.

He ran between densely packed, slender trees, their roots free of any undergrowth. He speedily meandered down a trailless path, dodging the trees as he followed the sound of the voice.

All of a sudden, a gust of freezing wind brushed past him. It was coming from up ahead.

“Wait...” he mumbled with a gasp. He could sense a cold, clear presence like that of a glowing blue moon on a winter’s night. It was the cool and serene yet unbelievably pure and gentle aura that Katsuki had so craved: his brother Misato’s.

He broke into a sprint, pounding through piles of decaying leaves. A strikingly white bird danced across the hill in front of him, fluttering through the air. A swallow.

In fact, there were two swallows weaving their way through the gaps in the trees, banking sharply. Their wings sliced cleanly through the air as they dove downward, focused on a specific location. *I know those swallows; they’re shikigami used to attack spirits. Which means...*

“Misato, no! Don’t! Misato, WAIT!” He shouted as loud as he could, skidding down the leaf-covered slope.

In the same instant, Katsuki witnessed the swallows cut through the girl’s black haze where she stood atop a hill. Of all people, Katsuki’s brother was the one pointing his blade at her.

“Katsuki?!” Misato exclaimed in shock, his eyes widening. Of course he was the first to notice Katsuki’s approach.

Katsuki stared at Misato, noting an air of maturity about his brother that wasn’t present in his memories. Misato’s iron-straight, black hair had grown long and hung to his waist in a neat ponytail for use in secret rituals passed down to only direct descendants of the Narukami line. He’d grown into his body and features somewhat, making him appear more masculine than Katsuki remembered. Yet his doll-like soft cheeks and beautiful, luminous gaze remained unchanged.

“Misato!” Katsuki called out.

Misato appeared to be wearing some kind of uniform—a red jacket paired with unfashionable work trousers. The ensemble so mismatched his natural beauty that it was almost laughable. Katsuki had no idea what sort of work Misato was doing, nor what his life looked like at that point.

But all I have to do is convince him to come home with me. I’ll give him the life he deserves.

Taken aback by the reunion he’d been eagerly awaiting for years, Katsuki very nearly forgot about the girl—just for a moment.

“So you *were* on Mount Kagura, Katsuki! Quick, come here. Everyone’s been looking for you,” Misato said, extending a hand to Katsuki while giving the girl a cautious glance. His swallows continued to circle above.

Following Misato’s gaze, Katsuki set his eyes on the girl again and recalled what he was supposed to be doing. Misato’s stern tone frightened him a little, but he braved that fear and walked in front of the girl as if to shield her.

“Please, wait,” Katsuki asked again. The pulsating, moaning black mist continued to swirl around the girl as she glared at the ground.

“Katsuki...” Misato murmured urgently, his perfectly arched eyebrows drawing together in suspicion. “What’s wrong? Wakatake came all the way out here to pick you up. You should get back home as soon as possible.”

For some reason, the darkness behind Katsuki stirred in response to Misato’s words. Katsuki whipped around to look over his shoulder. The girl’s faint silhouette was trembling slightly within the whirlpool of shadow.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Katsuki asked her.

“Are you gonna leave me behind as well, Katsuki...?” she asked bitingly, her accusatory tone vibrating with anger.

Katsuki’s eyes widened. He quickly bent down and desperately tried to soothe her, calmly saying, “Wait, don’t get upset. I’ll explain.”

But the girl kept glowering at the ground, her fists balled. She refused to meet his eyes. “You said you were the same as me... but...you were lying, weren’t you?” she seethed, forcing her strained voice out while the cloud of darkness around her surged back and forth. “You’re just the same as Ofusa. You’re gonna go back home and abandon me here...” As she trailed off, Katsuki noticed her lips move soundlessly. He could’ve sworn they mouthed the words “But I won’t let you.”

“Wait—!”

The darkness advanced. A swarm of small, black beetles swathed Katsuki, forming several layers over his ears until their humming wings began to gradually morph into coherent whispers.

“Ever since our lady became pregnant with Master Katsuki, not once have she and our lord...”

“She probably can’t find it in her to love Master Katsuki...”

“Poor thing. Our lord’s still fixated on that common woman...”

“If only Master Misato had been the next head instead. There’d be none of this trouble...”

“With an attitude like his, I dread to think what reputation the clan will develop when he takes over...”

“Stop it! Shut up!” barked Katsuki, slapping his palms over his ears to block out the heart-piercing storm of words. He opened his mouth to invoke the purifying flames of Acala but hesitated. What if he hurt the girl?

A freezing blast of wind assaulted him from behind and mowed down the cloud of insects along with Katsuki’s hesitation, blowing everything in its path aside. Each wave of its penetrating cold was enough to make even Katsuki shiver as the gale engulfed their surroundings.

“Misa...to...” he croaked.

“To heaven, to earth, to north, east, south, and west—I sever the eight directions of the skies, the ten letters of the earth, and the hidden sound...” Misato went on to cast an incantation in a ruthless, cruel tone of voice. He was genuinely going to exorcise the girl without even a shred of mercy.

“Misato, wait,” Katsuki pleaded again. “Listen to me. This girl...”

“Get back to the other side, Katsuki. This is my job.”

Along with a *whoosh* of frigid wind that tore through the air, the swallows swooped down to attack the girl again. She covered her head with her arms, and her skin began to fissure into fine, crimson lines that ran from her elbows to her hands. Watching her cradle her head and scream, Katsuki could honestly think of her as nothing more than a poor, helpless girl who’d been mistreated.

What should I do?! I was so certain Misato would help her. But he’s...

The Misato he knew was a soft, tender person with a disposition like pure spring water. He wasn’t like the hateful, closed-minded adults who invariably disregarded those weaker than them under the pretext of family or work; he was on Katsuki’s side.

“Why...?” Katsuki lamented. The wind Misato wielded was so cold that it scraped the skin—and he was trying to slash right through the girl without a second thought. His appearance, his aura, his manner of speech... He was a totally different person from the brother Katsuki had believed in. Katsuki could only stand there dismayed as his “brother” cut past him and approached the girl.

“Even if you control the spiritual energy of the mountain, it is possible to sever you from what ties you to it. And I doubt you’d be able to stay in that form for very long without its energy. Do you *want* to disappear?” Misato prodded, clearly threatening her.

Her face contorted in terror and she took a step back—and Misato took a step forward, effectively cornering her. He raised his right hand, his first two fingers blatantly outstretched in a mudra. An icelike white blade, invisible to the average person, materialized in the air, aimed right at the haggard little girl. The girl’s reluctant retreat became a full-blown escape attempt as she finally pivoted on her heel and dashed away. The black mist shrouded her exposed back as if in defense, then lunged straight at Misato.

“Hyah!” grunted Misato as he sliced the black cloud neatly in two with his mudra. The halves feebly scattered, small particles dispersing into the air until the haze vanished completely.

The girl was long gone, however. A dense collection of trees already obstructed the path down which she’d fled, blocking it from view and deterring any pursuers.

“Phew.” Misato exhaled a light sigh and released his mudra

before turning back toward Katsuki. But his gaze flew right past his brother, and he spoke to someone behind Katsuki instead. “I don’t think she’ll come after you for the time being. I expect your husband and my colleague will arrive any second now.”

Katsuki looked over his shoulder to see a woman protectively clutching a small child. She was probably who Katsuki had heard screaming not long before. The woman nodded fractionally, her expression still stiff with nerves.

Satisfied with her acknowledgement, Misato at last swiveled to Katsuki. His eyebrows knitted together, and his lips were set in a disapproving frown. “You need to get away from this mountain and get back home as soon as possible,” he said. His voice was icy and strict, and he was acting as detached from Katsuki as possible.

Katsuki clenched his fists and willed his faltering heart to calm. He was too scared to look at his brother directly. He kept his head lowered as he forced his voice from his throat. “Can’t you...” he began, his voice tight. “Can’t you come back to the clan with me?”

A beat of hesitant silence elapsed before Misato replied in a somewhat gentler tone, “I’m not going back. I work at a town hall now, you know? Plus, I’m living as a Miyazawa. Nothing ties me to the Narukami clan anymore.”

It was an outright refusal. Katsuki’s head snapped up to meet Misato’s eyes. “I came to find you and bring you back!” he explained, still in denial. His voice wavered. “Once I take over the clan, I won’t let anyone speak badly about you ever again! In fact, I’ll do *anything* if it means you can come back! That’s the only reason I agreed to be head! To have *you* back!”

Misato’s lips stretched into an awkward, apologetic smile in response to Katsuki’s vehement insistence. He let his head droop forward marginally as if he were humoring a spoiled child before slowly shaking his head. “No, Katsuki. I’ll never go back,” he repeated. “I’ll never walk through those gates again. I decided that the moment I left the house. That’s why I can’t go back and live with you again.”

“No! If you’re not there, I don’t know how I’ll—”

“*Katsuki*,” Misato said in a low, commanding tone. “Forget about me. I’m always going to live my life completely separate from the Narukamis. So *please* don’t base your future on me—because I’m not going to be there.”

Katsuki's last ember of hope died with those coldhearted words. He was facing the very outcome he'd feared most, the possibility he had desperately turned a blind eye to. But he couldn't remain blind forever.

There's no place for me in his heart anymore. I'm a Narukami, so he cast me aside with what he remembers as a traumatic past. And it had been that way since the day Misato left, five years before. Yet Katsuki had again allowed himself to be the stupid, lonely fool obsessed with a one-sided game of tag. How ironic.

He hung his head once more, unable to bear his brother's face.

"Katsuki?" Misato questioned. The grass under his feet rustled as he edged closer.

Katsuki pursed his lips, not trusting himself to reply. Even then, he longed for the tender, reassuring words Misato used to give him at such times. His brother used to smile and say, "What am I going to do with you?" and stroke his head comfortingly, kneeling to meet Katsuki at eye level. Part of him craved that still, and his heart quickened as he wrestled with the brewing fear that he'd just be shrugged off.

Alas, Katsuki's lingering desires were never fulfilled.

"Miyazawa!" A man's voice sounded in the distance just as a barrage of footsteps approached.

"Konomi! Haruto!" another man called.

A small crowd had gathered in that strange realm in no time at all.

"Oh, Tsujimoto," Misato answered, turning away from Katsuki. "Haruto's safe, thankfully. Konomi's condition has improved for the moment, but she'll need to be checked out once we get out of here."

"Gotcha, thanks. I'm glad to hear that." The man smiled. Then his gaze pointedly landed on Katsuki. "And...he is?"

Katsuki froze.

"Right. This is Katsuki Narukami," Misato stated. "It seems like he's been conversing with the demon, so I was thinking we could ask him more about her once we get off this mountain." He spoke as if they were strangers, his tone heartbreakingly distant and formal.

"Ah, really? In that case, we'd better get outta here and regroup."

"Definitely." Misato nodded. "Come on, Katsuki. We're leaving."

Katsuki found himself shaking his head a little in response to his brother's aloof tone. "...No," he said.

"What?"

"I said NO!" he snapped, turning his back on Misato and fleeing as fast as he could. His slight form disappeared into the darkness amid the trees.

What am I supposed to do in a world where my brother doesn't exist anymore?!

That other man wouldn't listen to Katsuki. He'd ruthlessly attacked that poor little girl. He'd tried to send Katsuki back to the Narukamis, claiming it was his *job*. Misato Miyazawa was not his brother.

"See if I care about some random guy," he spat, bolting deep, deep into the mountains.

The trees whispered and stirred as he ran, enveloping and enshrouding him as if welcoming him into their world.

"**KATSUKI!** Where are you going?!" cried Misato. He stood before a cluster of trees after failing to grab hold of his brother in the wake of Katsuki's defiant refusal.

"Miyazawa..." Tsujimoto called from behind.

"...I'm sorry, Tsujimoto," Misato said, unable to even glance back at his mentor, who was supervising the case.

Then he ran.

"Hey! Miyazawa!" Tsujimoto protested.

For a civil servant, it was most definitely conduct worthy of punishment. Doubt crossed his mind for just a moment, but Misato quickly shook it off and plunged into the shadows in pursuit of Katsuki. Misato didn't have any equipment to discern his brother's location. Logically, he knew he wasn't making the wisest decision, but—

"*Katsuki!*" he shouted with all his might. "Katsuki, where are you?!"

I have to go after him. If I don't, I'll never forgive myself.

The spirit realm mutated as he plowed forward. Within just a few paces, his surroundings drastically changed. Looking behind himself, he didn't recognize the way he'd come. There was no

chance of retracing his footsteps.

What should I do? Do I send out another shikigami? I could... No, I'm already at capacity. He'd made the butterfly to search for the Sugiharas as well as two swallows to drive away the demon—plus the shikigami he lent Ookubo to stabilize the entrance to the Other Side at the back of Yasaka Shrine. And no matter how much he'd tried to replenish his energy in the interim, the previous day had still taken its toll on him. He didn't have the power to keep on making shikigami willy-nilly.

In this situation, I might as well continue calling for him with just my voice.

If—somewhere in his heart—Katsuki still wanted Misato to chase after him, it could work. If not, however, a one-sided game of hide-and-seek would never lead him to his brother. *Come on, Katsuki. Please come out. I thought you hated it when I can't find you right away.*

When they were young, Katsuki always hid near Misato whenever they played hide-and-seek. He chose the most obvious hiding spots, then giggled with mischievous glee when Misato found him. Once in a while, Katsuki lurked in places that turned out to be somewhat more obscure, and Misato did struggle a little to find him. In those cases, though, it wasn't long before Katsuki started to cry and willingly revealed himself, wailing because he'd been lonely. "Clingy" was the way to describe him.

If Katsuki no longer cared for Misato, the idea was futile. But Misato doubted that.

"Katsuki! Please, answer me! Katsukiiii!" he yelled as he passed over the thick roots of a Japanese camellia.

All of a sudden, something changed. There was a rotten, musty stench in the air that seemed to cling to the humidity, prompting Misato to come to a stop. His surroundings grew dim and gloomy as if it were twilight, and the dense clusters of thin cedar trees did nothing to help visibility. The forest looked like a tract of purposefully planted trees that had been left to ruin. Branches formed a ceiling above; the lack of sky would greatly hinder his ability to maneuver around fallen trees and stray boulders.

"What is this?" he asked himself with a grimace. *Have I accidentally wandered into the demon's lair?*

As Misato cautiously peered around, something seemed to glisten out of the corner of his eye from beyond the mishmash of

cedar trees.

“Ah—!” he gasped, thrusting his hand into his pocket to draw out the brand-new weapon he’d received that very day.

CLANG!

The high-pitched clatter of metal against metal rang out as a blade came hurtling toward him. Misato’s *tessen*—an iron-ribbed war fan—had repelled a small dagger with a decorative cross guard. Immediately, another came flying from a different direction. Misato swiftly knocked it away with his *tessen* once more. He bent to inspect the daggers.

“I know these... They’re from the Narukami clan,” he muttered. He recognized the distinctive craftsmanship. Yet the moment he picked one up to take a closer look, its features wavered and whirled—and morphed into that of a black snake.

Hissss. The serpent bared its fangs, hissing furiously as it lunged at Misato.

“Hyah!” Misato cried as he snapped his *tessen* closed and delivered a short, sharp blow to the snake’s body. The venomous creature was blasted back, and it thudded against a rock that jutted out of the earth before falling limply to the ground. He flicked his *tessen* open again, readying himself as he scoured the area for a sign of the second snake’s presence.

The psychics of the Narukami clan generally selected blades as their weapons. Misato had been schooled in the basics many years ago, too, but wasn’t much good at martial arts as a whole, so he’d spent most of his life unarmed. Yet because his job occasionally required physical combat, he figured he should keep a weapon on him that he could at least defend himself and parry attacks with. He’d deliberated over what to use for a long time but eventually decided on the very same *tessen* in his hands.

He’d been taught dance alongside his martial studies in order to refine and regulate his spiritual energy. He much preferred the arts to fighting, so rather than picking up a huge sword after years of minimal training, he instead opted for the familiarity of a large folding fan. It was much easier for him to use than an offensive weapon.

That said, he didn’t have the funds to invest in one of the really high-quality models, so his new battle implement was a cheap design bought by mail order. It wasn’t like he had enough skill to make up for its lower caliber either, so he didn’t have all too

much faith in the thing.

I need to find the source before this thing breaks... Shiota, can you sense anything?

Shiota was particularly sensitive to spiritual presences. Misato threaded his way through the trees in search of an area with slightly better visibility and eventually emerged into a tiny clearing where boulders had intercepted the trees. Urging caution, the white serpent nodded toward where one of the daggers had speedily originated from.

Misato prowled in the direction Shiota indicated. He concentrated, alert for the enemy's presence.

Footsteps crunched against withered twigs beyond the barrier of gaunt trees at the same time a peculiar cacophony of splitting earth rumbled, growing closer and closer as vibrations rippled through the ground.

Holding his tessens in his right hand to guard against the incoming force, Misato dug his left hand into his jacket pocket. He wormed his fingers into the drawstring pouch he stowed there and scooped up a handful of finely shredded pieces of paper mixed with rice. The blend was called *kirinusa* and was an implement often used in purification rituals.

What about my swallows? What happened to— Oh, they're still here. Phew.

After checking on the shikigami perching on a small branch behind him, Misato strained his eyes amid the dim light. The creeping, intensifying presence he sensed wasn't unlike the swarm of adzuki bean weevils, nor was it exactly the same. The aura he detected at that moment was full of animosity, obviously hostile. It felt like evil itself.

Judging by the rhythmic *snap, crack, rustle* of the nearing footsteps, the enemy walked on two legs. In contrast to the demon girl, however, there was a certain weight to its tread. Misato drew his tessens across his body and steeled himself with controlled breathing. He had no idea what was going on. Yet, one thing was for sure—he knew the owner of those footsteps.

“Hello, Wakatake. It's been a while. You must be here to search for Katsuki, I suppose?”

The footsteps ceased, and the darkness suddenly lifted to expose the man's visage, as if the moon were peeking between the clouds. The man merely stood there with an unstable feel about

him, dressed entirely inappropriately for mountain hiking. He was Shinichi Wakatake, Katsuki's tutor. His formal suit was coated with dead foliage, the hems all torn and frayed. His face was twisted into an expression that said he was at his wits' end. Misato returned his unusually fierce scowl with a quiet stare.

"It's *you*...Misato Narukami..." Wakatake hissed. "I knew it was you!" In tandem with his sudden outburst, two blades glinted from beyond the slim cedar trees.

"*Look right!*" Shiota exclaimed from within, aiding Misato. "*Above!*"

Somehow, with Shiota's help, Misato dodged both of the daggers as they came careening out of the shadows. Then he sharply fanned the air above his left hand with his tessen, causing the kirinusa to act as tiny projectiles. The pellets shot through the gaps in the thicket to assail Wakatake.

A black mist seeped from beneath Wakatake's feet and gradually stole around him like a shimmer of hot air. The mist began to spiral, coiling its way around Wakatake's body almost as if it were a snake. A fleeting collection of sparks peppered the air when Misato's kirinusa collided with the haze.

"Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen!" Misato chanted, slashing his tessen in the Kuji-in Mudra. The area he marked out with the motions managed to blow part of the dark cloud away.

So, he ended up becoming the very thing he hunted, huh? Ugh... Why is this happening?!

Misato was loathe to actually hurt the man. But Wakatake was an experienced, professional psychic. To see him consumed by resentment when he should have known better than to fall victim to it in the first place didn't exactly make Misato feel sympathy for the guy. *I guess there's no reason to go easy on him.*

"Attack!" Misato barked, gesturing as his two white swallows bowled into the black mist. The miasma undulated in protest, and several tendrils sprouted from its bulk to reach for the swallows.

Besides, Misato's opponent was a fighter who could easily handle daggers, whereas Misato was an amateur sorely lacking in experience. He couldn't afford to give Wakatake an opportunity to recover.

Either way, this is all futile unless I can do something about that mist.

One of the swallows dropped to the ground.

“With the High Plain of Heaven’s great, divine verse, exorcise and purify. O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind—kyuu kyuu nyo ritsu ryou!” Misato recited, brandishing his tessens. The sudden gust of wind he summoned cleaved right through the surrounding cedar trees as well as the black tendrils, which dissipated into thin air. Thrown off guard by the huge blast, Wakatake was wide open for the last swallow to divebomb him.

Still and silent, Misato paused for a moment to assess the situation, straining his ears. While Misato attentively observed, Wakatake fell on his behind with a pronounced *thud*. The man’s head lolled limply; he wasn’t even trying to get back up—listening closely, however, Misato heard him whispering something. The black mist started to encircle Wakatake once more. There was no doubt he’d been possessed by something truly evil.

The cedar trees, which grew spindly and tall as a result of a lack of sunlight, toppled to the ground with a fearsome boom, felled by the gust of wind intended to disperse the haze.

Ever so slowly, step by step, Misato cautiously approached Wakatake. The dark brume hung stagnant in the air, each particle sluggishly oozing to the ground and vanishing. “Wakatake,” Misato said, addressing him from afar as he concealed his tessens behind his back. He was well aware of the fact that Wakatake had never liked him. They had constantly vied to secure a place in the Narukami clan, each contesting for the same role.

“Misato Narukami...” Wakatake growled, his voice weak and mired in bitterness. “Where...did you hide Master Katsuki...?”

“I have nothing to do with Katsuki’s disappearance,” Misato assured him. “We found him here on this mountain, but he just ran away from me a few minutes ago. More importantly, what are *you* doing here?”

Wakatake’s shoulders twitched slightly in response to Misato’s accusatory tone. “I came...to get Master Katsuki back... You lured him away from us and led him here, didn’t you...?”

“Like I said, I have nothing to do with it. Why would you th—”

“No, no... I know you...” seethed Wakatake. “You already proved your intentions... You *already* tried to kidnap Master Katsuki. You do *nothing* but get in his way!”

A mushrooming cloud of darkness swelled from the ground once more, a section of it hardening into yet another dagger that floated ominously in the air. In seconds, Misato was surrounded by

daggers in all directions—all pointed at him.

Misato just about managed to evade the ceaseless rain of daggers, warding them off with his tessen as he retreated. Then agony flared in his right arm; one of the blades had grazed him. He grimaced, overcome by a panicked rush of molten pain as he realized his dominant hand was wounded. A lukewarm liquid began to trickle past the hem of his sleeve, staining his scorching hot arm. It solidified into a ghastly, venomous snake at an alarming speed, and Misato could feel the creature worming its way into his body through the wound the dagger had left.

“You’re planning to eliminate Master Katsuki and take his place as the next head of the family, aren’t you?!” Wakatake snapped, his voice breaking as he shouted. “You ruined everything! Until *you* came along, everyone and everything was already as it should have been! We were all fulfilling our roles! If only...if only you’d never existed, you *monster*!”

As if in response to Wakatake’s verbal attack, the venomous snake constricted Misato’s heart as it slinked inside his body. It recalled the unpleasant experience he’d suffered five years prior, and for a moment all he could do was grit his teeth and try to endure the pain. The way it squeezed Misato’s insides evoked the exact same sensation of the battle he’d fought that night—the night a parasitic snake tore holes in his intestines and devoured his organs from within. The night he’d been forced to perform a twisted ritual of consuming the very curse that consumed him, its aura rife with insurmountable hostility, spite, and bloodlust meant *specifically* for him.

“...Are you done yet? I’m not here to listen to your tantrum,” Misato declared in a cold, blunt tone, willing the surging pain and fear away. The venomous serpent assaulting him was no more than an illusion. Just like the nightmare he’d had the night before, the miasma lurking in the mountains projected its enemies’ memories and deepest feelings back onto them. And Misato wasn’t going to fall for it a *third* time.

“Hyah!” Misato grunted. He whacked himself in the chest with his left fist, the impact of the blow charged with spiritual energy. The snake vanished instantly.

“I don’t doubt for a second that I got in your way a lot,” Misato continued, looming in front of Wakatake. “You used to get in my way as well, after all. But if you think everything would’ve

been hunky-dory if only I'd never been there... Pfft, well—just take a look at your current situation. I've absolutely no interest in the Narukami clan anymore. I never even *tried* to reach out to Katsuki, never mind guide him all the way here. And I will never, ever, *ever* join in this little game of musical chairs you and Katsuki have going on in that stupid, narrow-minded clan."

Misato didn't think of himself as clever or superior for getting out of that stiff, closed-off world; his circumstances, upbringing, and birthright were completely different from Wakatake's. That contrast in their environments had led their lives down distinct paths. What was the point of looking down on Wakatake—even if he did hate the guy—when their circumstances were no fault of their own? If Misato's life had transpired ever so slightly differently, perhaps he and Wakatake would still be stuck in their battle over a place to belong.

"I admit that I roped Katsuki into my plans to run away back when we were children," Misato added. "I got on that bus thinking I'd never go back—though not because I wanted to get rid of Katsuki. In fact, the only reason I brought him was because I didn't want to let him go."

Sure, he did something dumb. On that midsummer night, he used Katsuki's demands as an excuse to get out of the house, although he had nowhere to go. He was so sick of the living world at that point that he just wanted to *leave*, no matter what—but he wasn't ready to let the little bird in his breast pocket fly the nest quite yet. So he boarded a bus with no return journey, hand in hand with his little brother.

He'd wished to go somewhere far, far away, along with little Katsuki who knew nothing at all.

"I'm not going to make excuses for what I did. But..." Thinking back over the last five years, Misato couldn't see a single alternative to his decision to cut himself off from the Narukamis. If he'd allowed his father or brother to console him and persuade him to stay after being forced to ingest the snake, his spirit would have surely died.

Plus, if I kept clinging to Katsuki and the clan like that, I probably would've ended up strangling Katsuki to death one day.

When the time came for Katsuki to leave the small confines of Misato's arms, Misato would likely have reached out to snatch the little bird back midflight, his fingers tightening desperately around

Katsuki's neck to keep his brother imprisoned. Therefore, he had no right to say Wakatake was wrong for condemning him; their codependency was objectively harmful for everyone involved.

"...But I still despise you from the bottom of my heart for how careless you've been. As an adult, *you* should have protected Katsuki. But you never did—and you still don't," Misato stated with a sense of finality.

"*Shut the hell up!*" Wakatake roared. He leaped to his feet and hurled his body forward with a power that could not possibly have been produced by muscle alone. Simultaneously, multiple venomous snakes sprouted from the ground and converged on Misato.

"You're a monster!" Wakatake raved. "It's *all* your fault! Everything! It's all because of you! *Everything!* If I can just annihilate you, I'll get Master Katsuki back! *Me!* The one person worthy of standing at Master Katsuki's side! I'll make everyone see that! I'll prove myself!"

"To whom?" Misato countered in a low voice. He swiftly swung his open tessen, swatting away all of the attacking snakes in one fell swoop. "The *only* person you should be proving yourself to is Katsuki himself! You should've been attending to Katsuki, but no—you neglected him. So who the heck do you really serve? That's why I never respected you right from the very start!"

He flicked his tessen shut and pooled all his might into its tip as he launched himself at Wakatake. Focusing his attention on Wakatake's forehead, Misato landed a well-aimed blow right between the man's eyebrows.

SHWP. With a sharp zap, Wakatake was knocked backward headfirst. He crashed into a cedar tree, the collision snapping its thin trunk before he collapsed to the ground.

Misato's shoulders heaved with each breath. He eyed Wakatake with contempt. "Sure, I needed Katsuki in order to survive back in the clan. But more than that, I really just wanted him to love me and need me back. He could be so sweet, and I genuinely wanted to protect him," Misato recounted. Their relationship had been warped, yet not all of it was due to his need for status or belonging. He had been utterly fixated on Katsuki.

I truly hated Wakatake for treating the role of Katsuki's aide like a mere position of power. I hated that he didn't love Katsuki.

Misato had his fair share of things he had to apologize to

Katsuki for. Misato may have made some bad decisions when backed up against a wall, but the fact remained that he had made those choices himself, and he was prepared to shoulder all of the accompanying blame.

But first, if Misato was to redeem himself at all, he had to get Katsuki back to the human world. He quickly checked to make sure Wakatake's chest still rose and fell, then shifted his focus back to finding Katsuki. He suddenly remembered the charm Ryouji had given him so they could contact one another across realms. Ryouji was supposed to be somewhere on the mountain, searching for Katsuki.

Oh, crap. I forgot to contact him to say Katsuki's here... I hope he won't be too mad at me.

Misato stuck his hand in his jacket pocket with a wince and produced an origami crane made of washi paper. He spread the crane-shaped charm's wings and propelled it into the air, at which point the paper transformed into an actual bird. It flapped its wings and disappeared beyond the thicket. Misato watched until it vanished from sight, then took a long, deep breath before projecting his voice in the same direction the bird had fluttered.

"Ryoujiiiiii! Get over here! Ryoujiiiiiii!" As instructed, he called for the thuggish psychic three times, pausing to inhale between each shout.

He decided to stay exactly where he was while he awaited a reply. A gruff sigh escaped his lips as he sunk down in front of a boulder and leaned back, waiting for Ryouji to arrive.

The gash on his right arm began to complain the moment Misato finally relaxed. The searing pain made him suck in a breath through his teeth as he examined the cut, unimpressed to see his jacket sleeve torn and stained with blood. The wound wasn't so severe as to require immediate medical attention, but the sensation of his clothes, wet with blood, sticking to his skin was wholly unpleasant.

"What should I do now?" he mused with a weary huff. "If Ryouji gets here fast enough, it'd probably be safer to leave things to him. We've got *that* to deal with, too..." he muttered, glancing to where Wakatake was collapsed at the foot of a tree. He couldn't just leave Wakatake there, but he didn't have the strength to carry the man back alone.

Either way, what the hell was that thing that possessed him? More

of that miasma in the mountain air, I guess...? But it definitely took the form of adzuki bean weevils when the demon was controlling it. Plus, that aura around Wakatake felt slightly different from the bean weevils, too... Perhaps it changed according to Wakatake's desires—one of which is to harm me, obviously.

He slowly lifted his tessens in his right hand to take a look at it, using his left hand to keep pressure on his wound. "Aw, yikes. It's all beaten up. I should've realized getting a cheaper one would only make replacing it more expensive in the long run," he sighed.

He'd been neglecting to seal Shirota up at night recently, and his decrease in talisman purchases meant that he had a little more money to spare than usual. If he paid in installments, perhaps he could buy a suitably sturdy tessens through a more legitimate channel. He tucked the dismally scratched and dented fan back into his breast pocket, his heart heavy with regret that it had been destroyed on its very first outing.

With another big sigh, he let his head fall back against the boulder, staring up at the blanket of mist above the canopy of cedar trees. There was no telling what time of day it was, nor the state of the weather. Additionally, all of their electronic devices and watches had been rendered useless the instant they stepped out of Yasaka Shrine and onto the mountain.

Rustle, crunch, snap. A sudden stirring underfoot dragged Misato's gaze downward. A myriad of quiet noises bustled in the dim, obscure shadows at his feet.

"...This mountain never lets up, huh?" Misato tutted, standing. He drew his tessens from his pocket yet again. He studied the dark ground below him carefully, and when the source of the sound brushed against the toes of his work sneakers, its form was revealed. "You've got to be kidding. What's with these snakes?!"

Dozens of mottled black, venomous snakes slithered across the soil. Misato reflexively kicked the one touching his toes far away, then anchored his foot on top of the boulder he'd been sitting against and hauled himself up to (relative) safety.

The white serpent in his gut was extremely on edge. Since Misato's ablutions that morning, his consciousness had synced with that of the snake spirit. They could constantly monitor each other's states as if part of their minds were functioning as one. Because Shirota was far more sensitive to malicious presences than Misato, his help meant they'd become much more adept at combat.

The dense confluence of miasma coalesced into a colossal, black serpent. It reared its head in front of Misato, its glaring, fiery scarlet eyes locked onto him. Its abdomen was thick and heavy, and led to a triangular head on one end and a short tail on the other.

Come on—I still have one swallow left!

The shikigami was already rather exhausted, but Misato called for it all the same and sent it winging toward the venomous snake's head. The swallow dove at the serpent, and Misato took the opportunity to leap backward and put some distance between him and the snake. However...

"Gh—!"

The serpent didn't even flinch in response to the swallow, instead lunging straight for Misato. He somehow dodged the first swipe of its fangs and fended off the second by thrusting his tessens up to the side of his face. Evidently, that was as far as cheap craftsmanship could get him, for the tessens at last snapped and popped out of its frame.

"Agh!"

I'm seriously done for, Misato thought, yet by some stroke of luck he avoided another swipe of the snake's fangs. In a succession of graceless stumbles, he reclaimed his sense of balance, then faced the venomous snake head-on.

Do I even have enough time to perform the Kuji-in...?

His proximity to the creature meant that he would have to act fast. But as Misato hesitated nervously, Shiota's voice resounded from within him: *"Let's go."*

"What?! No, wait...!"

The white serpent slid through the collar of Misato's polo shirt and flung himself into the air before increasing in size until he filled the clearing with his huge body.

"Hey! I don't want to start the world's first spirit war!" cried Misato in a panic. Shamelessly ignoring his warning, Shiota glowered at the black snake amid the dark cluster of dense trees.

A few moments passed as the two serpents stared each other down, thumping their tails threateningly against the earth. Unlike the smaller spirits Shiota had handled before, the black serpent was around the same size as him. The pearly snake wasn't going to be able to solve the standoff by quickly tossing his opponent into his mouth and gulping it down like usual.

Misato was powerless as he observed the duel from behind

Shirota; he could do absolutely nothing anywhere near their level.

After a couple tense minutes of meaningful staring, the black snake advanced. Aiming for the neck, it stabbed downward, poised to sink its fangs into Shirota. Shirota was just barely able to clear the attack, however, and used the opening to propel himself forward with all his strength, heading straight for the black serpent. His fangs pierced its mottled body, and then, nimbly coiling himself around it, he *squeezed*.

He stopped it! Now's my chance!

"To heaven, to earth, to north, east, south, and west—I sever the eight directions of the skies, the ten letters of the earth, and the hidden sound. Ten of one, ten of two, ten of three, ten of four, ten of five, ten of six—I release all with a mighty power. Begone!" Misato brought his palms together with a loud *clap*, and the black snake's head jerked upward as though struck from below by the sound itself. Its thick, heavy body slowly lost its silhouette, melting back into a black haze.

Shirota's tail quivered in frustration as he reluctantly lowered back to the ground, his prey physically uncontainable.

"That's enough, Shirota," Misato commanded. "Come back to me." The white serpent was incredibly powerful and couldn't be controlled the same way as a shikigami.

When the squeezing pain inside him finally subsided, Misato let out a huge sigh of relief. He and the snake spirit were deeply connected—in fact, it was more accurate to say the spirit was a part of him. So while Shirota and the black serpent were throttling one another, Misato had shared in the snake's pain and effort even as he merely stood there.

I'd predicted that might be the case, and this just proves it—when Shirota gets hurt, I can feel it, too.

Still on lookout for the black haze or the venomous snake, Shirota cautiously slinked back to Misato. He wasn't bothering to hide his disappointment, and an apologetic chuckle spilled from Misato's throat.

"It's okay," he comforted Shirota. "We'll figure something out without putting you in danger."

Gold rings jangled against one another in the distance: the high-pitched sound of a mighty exorcism taking place. Shirota immediately dove back inside Misato in alarm while the lingering black mist took cover in the shadow of the trees as if to avoid the

noise. Moments later, a set of light, bouncing footsteps approached.

“*Namah samanta vajranam ham!*” confidently chanted the voice of a young, driven man.

A white flame ignited the darkness with a *whoosh*. The fire spread through the thicket of trees, licking at their trunks while the mist caught ablaze in the air. The level of light around Misato increased drastically.

He turned to look at who’d cast the purifying flames of Acala and vanquished the murky haze. “Phew. Thanks, Ryouji. We were almost dead meat for a second there.” Misato smirked, slightly embarrassed.

“What took ya so long to report back to me, idiot? You *know* you’re in no physical state to be pushin’ yourself all alone. You shoulda called me.”

Misato’s gaze fell on his thug-like housemate. Ryouji, wielding his *khakkhara* and standing with his hands proudly on his hips, stared back at Misato with a sour look on his face.

Chapter 12: Causation and Fate

MISATO and Katsuki had made contact.

Tsujimoto was the one to inform Ryouji of that fact. Ryouji had ascended Mount Kagura to carry out his work separately from the Abnormal Disaster Unit—that work being to find Katsuki as tasked, as well as to meet up with the man who'd hired him and recklessly gone on ahead without his permission.

Naturally, Misato was privy to all those details. *So why'd that jerk leave me hangin' in the dark, huh? Not only did he find Katsuki, but he also encountered Wakatake. And he still didn't freakin' tell me.*

The way Ryouji's penniless housemate had woodenly turned around suggested he was expecting to be scolded. The look on his face sure was awkward.

Ryouji lit the cigarette in his mouth with deliberate slowness. His khakhara rested in his other hand. A lopsided grin stretched across his face, his cigarette gripped between his teeth. Glancing over the cowering civil servant once more, Ryouji saw that the man's flashy red jacket was tattered and dirty and that his left hand was covered in blood where it clutched his right arm. Ryouji frowned as he blew out a puff of smoke, pained to see Misato in such an unbecoming state.

"S-Sorry..." apologized Misato. "It's just...I was kinda overwhelmed by everything that was happening, so I forgot to report back to you. I'm really sorry..." He feebly ducked his head as far as he could, seeming to transform into some kind of small animal.

Ryouji sighed and stubbed his cigarette out in his pocket ashtray—though he'd only taken one drag of it—before walking over to Misato. "Welp, whatever. You remembered in the end, so I'll give you a pass this time. Were you the one who did a number on that guy?" he asked, gesturing at Wakatake's limp body.

"Y-Yeah," Misato admitted sheepishly. "He...is alive, isn't he? I hope it's safe to move him. I was scared to even try on my own."

Ryouji thought it a little ironic that Misato was the one scared

when he had pulverized the guy. Sure, Misato had power, but he was sorely lacking in combat experience. In fact, that was probably the first time he'd ever fought an actual, living human.

Ryouji approached Wakatake and crouched in front of him, accompanied by a very timid Misato. Ryouji first checked to see if he was breathing, then put two fingers to his neck to check his pulse. He scanned Wakatake's body for any heavy bleeding or obviously broken bones before determining that it was simply a case of lost consciousness. Ryouji rolled the man over so that he was lying flat on his back. There was a huge bruise between his eyebrows that indicated internal bleeding.

...Misato might be a wuss, but he can sure pack a hit. He's definitely the sorta guy I wouldn't wanna provoke. Despite his lack of combat experience, it seemed as though his battle with Wakatake had been a bona fide death match. Perhaps the situation had been so urgent that he didn't have the chance to consider holding back.

Ryouji hummed slightly as he pondered his next steps. If Wakatake didn't wake up sometime soon, they'd be in truly deep water. *Maybe I should cast some kinda charm on him as insurance to prove I did all I could.* He pressed his fists just below Wakatake's navel and poured energy into his fingers as he chanted a life-prolonging incantation. Wakatake's body spasmed for a moment, then his breathing deepened, slower than it had been a minute prior.

Satisfied, Ryouji gave a quick nod. "Aight. We should be able to toss this guy over your shoulder and get outta here. D'ya think you're okay to—"

Take him, Ryouji was about to say, but he threw his right hand up in front of his face. A blade was wedged between his first two fingers. Misato's jaw dropped open, gasping in astonishment as he registered the fact that Ryouji had just caught a rogue flying dagger with *one hand*.

The dagger melted into a black, slithering snake. Ryouji sucked his teeth in irritation and unfalteringly pinned the serpent against a nearby boulder. He crushed it against the rock's surface.

"Still not had enough of us, huh?" Ryouji snorted as the snake's remains gradually lost shape and evaporated into dark mist.

"I think it's the same spirit I came across back at Yasaka Shrine, but..." murmured Misato, biting his lip as he warily came to stand next to Ryouji. "What do you think it is?"

“Whaddya mean?”

“Well...” Misato began, wedging his chin between his thumb and forefinger. His gaze dropped. “Until now, I assumed it was probably a miasma created by the demon’s malicious intent. But... why would it possess Wakatake? I saw the demon myself not long ago, and she looked like a ten-or-so-year-old girl—plus the mist she could control had a slightly different aura than this one. It’s possible she sent it over here to control Wakatake...but if that were the case, how could these snakes still be attacking us while he’s unconscious?”

The miasma that had possessed Misato in Yasaka Shrine had taken the form of adzuki bean weevils. It had gushed forth from the divine vessel housed in the shrine, and tellingly, the demon girl had commanded a very similar haze of insects.

“If the mist turned into snakes rather than bean weevils because of Wakatake’s influence, it either should’ve disappeared once he lost consciousness or at least turned back into beetles. But these snakes are still coming after us, y’know? Something’s not right,” Misato reasoned.

“I agree that it probably changed shape based on an image in Wakatake’s mind. I mean, it’s not like a miasma has its own form to begin with, yeah? It makes sense that it’d change dependin’ on who’s controllin’ it, but...can’t say I’ve got a clue why it’s still in snake form,” Ryouji mumbled thoughtfully.

Sure enough, the air around them felt different from what had been lurking in Misato’s room. The bean weevils that Ryouji had exorcised the night before had felt somewhat slipperier, vaguer—as if of little substance. The energy of the venomous snakes skulking in the shadows was much more defined, palpably evil and bitter. In a strange way, their aura seemed more...perfected.

“Aight, let’s have a look. I’m sure a glance will be all it takes.” Ryouji smirked as he removed his sunglasses. His tengu eyes were convenient when he wanted to identify an enemy more accurately, yet he preferred not to use them if he could help it. Directly laying eyes on terrible, terrible things really took its toll on him. No one truly wanted to observe malice or resentment in the flesh, as it were.

Despite his reluctance, Ryouji opened his tengu eyes and stared right into the miasma-infected darkness. Something squirmed deep within the dense, devastated forest of thin cedar trees.

It was a collection of human faces.

“Ack! What the *hell* are those?!” yelled Ryouji.

In the shade of the swaying cedar branches, faces endlessly flickered in and out of existence, becoming dimly visible for a few moments before sinking back into nothingness. They were old, young, male, female—all sorts of people emerged from the shadows, their pale visages contorted in what appeared to be monstrous screams of fear and anguish.

“I knew I shouldn’t have looked,” Ryouji commented, shaken. He quickly replaced his sunglasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“...What did you see?” Misato asked gingerly.

“Uhhh.” Ryouji hesitated, floundering for a way to describe what he’d just witnessed. “It’s fear.”

“Fear?” Misato blinked. “Not the human sacrifice’s resentment?”

“It’s way bigger than that. It ain’t got nothin’ to do with the mountain *or* the sacrifice. It’s from a whole load of humans.” Ryouji shuddered as he recalled the grotesque display of human expression. “It’s not resentment and it’s not malice. It’s more like... so many people have gathered here that it’s turned into somethin’ like a curse. It’s pretty old, and the number of people has increased over the years. Ugh... We’ve sure got our work cut out for us.”

“Hold on, my head’s a total mess. I can’t think straight... Either way, we’re going to be in real trouble if we don’t return to the foot of the mountain soon,” Misato urged, his hand on his chin in thought.

“True,” Ryouji agreed with a nod. For one thing, Misato was hurt. Ryouji was about to tell him to go get his wound treated and report back to the others, but...

“Ryouji,” Misato said, “can you still use that messaging charm from before? I’m all out of shikigami, but I need to go after Katsuki. I can’t go back down without him.”

His injuries must’ve made his head go funny.

“*Huh?*” Ryouji scoffed, freezing on the spot. He stiffly turned to look at Misato and lowered his voice threateningly. “The hell d’ya think you’re sayin’, jerk? Have you forgotten that you’re literally *covered* in blood, cuts, and bruises right now?”

“Huh?” Misato blinked again, a dopey expression on his face.

Ryouji anchored his fingers on top of Misato’s head, rubbing

the scalp jovially as he replied, “Do I have to remind you of what your job is, *Mr. Miyazawa*?” Incidentally, Misato’s skin felt very tight beneath Ryouji’s fingertips, likely due to the stress of the past few days.

“But... But even you were saying I should go meet Katsuki personally, so—ow ow ow! Hey, stop that!”

“You ever heard of adaptability? Look at yourself! Ain’t it obvious the circumstances have changed?!” Ryouji tutted in disbelief, sliding his hand down from Misato’s head to lock him in a chokehold.

“Agh!” Misato complained with a squawk, whacking Ryouji’s arm in protest. Both of his hands were coated in crimson-red blood where they latched onto Ryouji’s forearm; his wound was probably pretty deep. For all his talent, brains, courage, and genius...Misato Miyazawa was sorely lacking in common sense.

“B-But I gotta—”

“But you gotta *what*?!” snapped Ryouji. “You’re totally drained—not to mention your dominant hand’s been put outta commission—while your enemy’s still completely unharmed! And findin’ Katsuki was *my* job to begin with, not yours! What d’ya think you’re doin’ hoggin’ the whole case to yourself, huh?!”

Misato kicked and flapped against Ryouji, yet his blows were barely perceptible. Naturally, Ryouji was physically stronger than him to begin with, but Misato’s paltry resistance simply proved that he was at his limit. Indeed, it seemed as though he was only upright through sheer willpower. Between his possession and lack of sleep, to have to then dive headfirst into physical combat with an old acquaintance while experiencing spiritual interference must have left Misato utterly exhausted.

“But I think something I said must’ve given him the wrong idea! I need to find him and talk it out!” Misato insisted as soon as Ryouji released him, his expression even paler and more pathetic than usual.

Ryouji had heard from Tsujimoto how Katsuki had suddenly spiraled into a fit of rage and ignored Misato’s calls as he sprinted farther into the mountains. Ryouji could understand Misato’s panic; the brothers had reunited only for Katsuki to run away again. But he couldn’t just let Misato remain in the mountain’s clutches in such an awful condition.

“Like I *said*, you’re in no state to go anywhere. Get a hold of

yourself, yeah? This ain't like you. If I were Tsujimoto or your manager, d'ya think they'd let you off the hook? No chance in hell! I'll go get Katsuki. I'll drag him back kickin' and screamin' if I have to, so right now all *you* have to do is focus on treatin' your arm and wait for me. Get your manager to make you some of that god-awful talisman tea if you really want," Ryouji barked.

Usually Misato was quick to comprehend and recognize logic. In fact, he normally showed distaste for people who behaved rashly and landed themselves in compromising situations. Misato carried himself with composure and tended to think rationally before acting—usually. Ryouji had intended to reassure him with soothing, gentle words but was rapidly losing patience as Misato stubbornly maintained his refusal.

Ryouji himself had Misato's passion and hard-working ethic to thank for saving him in the past. And he wasn't going to stop Misato from caring for Katsuki in the same manner. At that moment, however, Misato wasn't the only one looking out for Katsuki.

"Just leave the rest to me," Ryouji tried to assert yet again, but Misato appeared to turn a willfully deaf ear to his instruction. Ryouji frowned in exasperation.

The guy really is pigheaded when it comes to his little brother, huh?

Misato had always been the type to shoulder his worries all alone, and it was an almost Sisyphean task to convince him to do otherwise. Ryouji scratched the back of his head awkwardly, at a total loss for what to do.

"Please, Ryouji," Misato said, an agonized look in his eyes. "I promise I won't get in your way." He plastered a strained, helpless smile on his face as if that would be enough to persuade Ryouji.

The indecision brewing in Ryouji's chest quickly morphed into anger. "What's your freakin' issue, you stubborn-ass lump?! Ya think I wouldn't get the job done perfectly fine on my own? Why don'tcha trust me?!" he exploded, slamming his khakkhara against the ground with a pointed jingle.

"N-No, I didn't mean..." croaked Misato in surprise. He recoiled in response to Ryouji's outburst, although he didn't seem to realize it.

"C'mon, you totally did," Ryouji countered in a gruff, muted tone. "Seein' as you wanna force yourself to go back out there in that state, all I can assume is that ya think I'll mess it up alone."

“No!” Misato said with a firm shake of his head. “Things have gotten so complicated because of my actions. I can’t stand making you go through more trouble because of what I—”

“You’re torturin’ yourself for literally no reason. I hate the way you pile blame onto yourself then try to go about fixin’ everything all on your own. Let other people in!” Ryouji huffed and dug his fingers into the front of Misato’s shirt. He pulled Misato closer, forcing the onmyoji to meet his eye.

He’s sure closed off for a guy who loves stickin’ his nose into other people’s business.

Ryouji was reminded of something Misato had once said to him and that had occupied his mind ever since: “I’m saving you because I don’t want to lose you.”

And with that very same mouth, he rejected Ryouji’s help over and over. *I guess he doesn’t even realize how hypocritical he’s being. Jerk.*

Because in Misato’s world, nobody was on his side. Misato Miyazawa was a man with deep-seated, ingrained trust issues. In his mind, everyone around him—including Ryouji—was just another candidate for potential betrayal.

Why? When did he start to think like that? Ryouji had his ideas, but only the man in question could tell him the real answer.

Misato lived carefully. He refrained from indebting himself to anyone in order to prevent them from learning his weaknesses. He honed his strength and intellect so that he could live without ever asking for someone’s help and risking vulnerability. So although he seemed like an unshakable force at first glance, at the root of his power was cowardice. The weapons Misato wielded in defense of his shrouded heart were anxiety and caution. No matter where, he’d always been alone. While Ryouji had believed he’d finally found a companion to stand beside him in the very same dark world, Misato persisted in loneliness.

That fact suffused Ryouji’s heart with incredible sadness—both the knowledge that Misato had been alone for so long, as well as the revelation that actually, there was no one beside Ryouji after all.

He recalled Tsujimoto’s words from their brief exchange of information just before he started up Mount Kagura: “Karino. This might be kinda weird coming from me, but...yeh will look after Miyazawa for me, won’t yeh?”

Ryouji understood what he was hinting at. There were certain professional boundaries that Tsujimoto and Yoshida couldn't exactly overstep as Misato's colleagues. Therefore, they wanted Ryouji to do what he could for Misato on a more personal level. In truth, Ryouji was the only person outside of work that Misato regularly interacted with. And because Misato hated allowing his personal baggage to interfere with his job, it was far more difficult for coworkers such as Tsujimoto to address Misato's inner worries.

"Listen to me, Misato," Ryouji said in a level tone, keeping a firm grasp on him as their gazes connected at point-blank range. "If I told ya that people can't truly live by themselves, I bet you'd think it was nothin' more than lip service or some kinda fanciful line from a manga, right? Well, I'm tellin' ya it's way more unrealistic to believe that the gods only give ya challenges that you can never overcome. Karma doesn't exist in this world. You know that better than anyone, don'tcha? Not everyone's dealt the same hand in life. The world ain't so kind as to keep on givin' you problems that are actually possible to solve on your own." That was the cold, hard reality of the situation.

Ryouji conjured a smile over his pained expression and peered searchingly into Misato's eyes. The man's pretty features were rounded into a look of surprise as he stared back at Ryouji. It was at such times—times when, for just a moment, Misato let himself be vulnerable in Ryouji's presence—that Ryouji felt closer to him than ever.

"So don't be scared of relyin' on me, yeah? Even if we end up goin' our separate ways, or even if I really do betray you one day... we gotta live in the present. Turnin' to someone else for help ain't somethin' to be scared of if it means you'll live. You can worry 'bout the past or future all you like—but leave it for when you're actually in the moment, 'kay? It's no good tryna survive when you're being dictated by 'what ifs.'"

Just as there came a day that they joined hands, there would come a day when they let each other go. The circumstances of their goodbye were impossible to know. But parting ways with someone you thought you'd spend your entire life with didn't mean that the time you had left with them was wasted—life wasn't eternal, after all. Ryouji's adoptive father had taught him that.

"Just like how you said before that you were savin' me for your own sake...I wanna help you just cuz I *want* to. You don't have

the right to deny me of what I want for myself, do ya?"

Ryouji could sense Misato's desire to resist fading away by the second. Finally, he let go of Misato's shirt, satisfied that his point had at last sunk in. Misato's heels thudded back to the ground, and he stood shorter than Ryouji once more. His widened eyes fixated themselves on the ground as his voice came out in a shaky, stricken apology.

"Sorry..."

"Aight, there we go. Now that you've seen sense, you'll let me go search for Katsuki, yeah?" Ryouji said with a smile. He reached forward to gently rub the crown of Misato's head where he'd been manhandling him minutes before. Misato gave a tiny, reluctant nod in reply. It was in instances like those that Ryouji remembered that Misato was somewhat younger than him.

"What do you say?" Ryouji prompted.

"I'm sorry. I should've left you to it..."

"That's not what I was gettin' at!" Ryouji sighed in exasperation and playfully grabbed at Misato's head yet again.

"Ack!" Misato bleated pitifully, catching Ryouji's eye to plead mercy.

"People apologize when they didn't do somethin' they were supposed to. Weren't you ever taught what to say when someone's helpin' you out?" Ryouji hinted haughtily. He propped his khakkhara over his right shoulder and ruffled Misato's hair with his left hand.

Misato's eyes wandered upward as he processed what Ryouji meant before resolutely meeting his gaze again. Misato clenched his fists nervously, and his cheeks flushed pink as he said, "Thank you, Ryouji. I'll wait for you."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Ryouji grinned, fondly rubbing the top of Misato's head once more before breaking away.

First off, there was no way Ryouji could leave Misato to drag Wakatake back down the mountain by himself. He decided he would take a brief detour to escort Misato back before pursuing his main target.

Right on cue, Wakatake groaned. Ryouji panicked a little—it would be bad if the guy started kicking up a fuss—so he promptly knocked Wakatake out again and dumped him over his shoulder like a huge sack of rice.

"U-Um," Misato said, taken aback. "Was that really the right

thing to do? Maybe it would be easier on you if he could walk by himself..." He looked up at Ryouji quizzically. Both of his hands were at work smoothing his hair down in the wake of Ryouji's tousling.

"It'll be fine," Ryouji assured him. "Unlike you, I just downed a load of your manager's suuuuper bitter talisman tea, so I'm all ready to get movin'."

An emergency with the Sugiharas had required Misato to rush right over to Mount Kagura without a chance to catch his breath. Meanwhile, Ryouji and Yoshida had remained at the main office to arrange for backup. Ryouji had been very grateful for the backup; Yoshida was kind enough to account for the fact that both Ryouji and Misato were functioning on a serious lack of sleep.

"...He didn't really make us talisman tea, did he?" fretted Misato aloud.

Revealing naught but a grin, Ryouji tapped his khakkhara against the ground and stepped forward. Its golden rings jingled as they made their way back down the mountain to deliver Misato and Wakatake to safety.

"YOSHIDA—we've just received word that Karino met up with Miyazawa...and that they'll, um, *carry* the Narukami guy back here," Tsujimoto announced to Toshimi, who'd been on standby at Nagaso Community Center while the operation unfolded. "I dread to think what happened, but anyway, it seems like they haven't found Katsuki yet. Miyazawa's injured, too."

Tsujimoto had returned to the foot of Mount Kagura about two hours prior, along with the Sugiharas, and Asaka had been assisting Toshimi at the community center down the hill from Yasaka Shrine. Ookubo was standing guard at the rift in Yasaka Shrine to ensure it didn't close up, maintaining the gateway with the help of one of Miyazawa's shikigami.

Toshimi took the piece of folded washi paper from Tsujimoto's outstretched hand. It was one of the origami charms Karino was fond of using. He'd evidently written his message within the paper bird, then sent it to Ookubo at the rift.

"The true identity of the Yasaka curse is...fear?" Toshimi read

aloud in confusion, gazing at the paper in consternation.

“Fear?” Tsujimoto echoed, just as befuddled. “All right, but... whose?”

“Karino says it’s from living people. Apparently, it’s all the fear that’s accumulated at Yasaka Shrine over time, so...I’d say it’s gotta be the Nagaso villagers’,” Toshimi deduced. “Fear, huh...? That makes a lotta sense. I guess that’s what the azukiarai story was really all about.”

“So what does that mean for us?” asked Tsujimoto, diagonally across the table from Toshimi. He kneeled, straightening his back.

The community center comprised a 360-square-foot tatami room with a tokonoma—a raised alcove for decorations and flowers—and a modest dirt-floor kitchen. It was an old building, so there was no partition between the two rooms. Three kerosene heater-stoves glowed red-hot, kettles steaming away on top of them. They’d placed a low folding table next to one of the heater-stoves, and Toshimi was using it as a makeshift desk. Mounds of binders were piled in front of him. Some contained the usual paperwork, which he turned his attention to in spare moments, but he was primarily focused on the stacks of documents relating to Nagaso.

“In hindsight it’s as obvious as anything, but...a detail was omitted from the origin story of Yasaka Shrine—the tale about stealing adzuki beans that were supposed to be offered to the mountain. The story neglects to mention the fact that the perpetrator wasn’t just one person. The thief—or should I say thieves—were the villagers of Nagaso. And in the legend of the azukiarai, anyone who succumbed to hunger and ate the adzuki beans meant for the yokai was cursed, remember? So the villagers decided to make a human sacrifice in place of the beans they’d eaten. Then, for whatever reason, the sacrifice didn’t work out, and... Yeah, that must’ve been when it started luring kids in.”

According to the data they’d found, the sacrifice had been a six-year-old girl named Ofusa. They soon discovered, however, that the child sacrificed wasn’t Ofusa but her older sister. Toshimi had devised that theory as a result of his own investigative efforts paired with Miyazawa’s personal encounter with the demon.

“What was the name of Ofusa’s sister again? The girl who was actually sacrificed... Kirino, was it?” Toshimi hummed.

Tsujimoto nodded in reply, selecting one of the files from the tower of paperwork to look over their summary of the case.

Kirino had been twelve at the time, and believed to have been spirited away. Her records from the family's preferred shrine were covered in sticky notes that provided modern Japanese translations for the archaic wording used in that era—which Toshimi had spent all of the previous night deciphering with the rest of the team. Most of the notes were Tsujimoto's work, so he had the best understanding of the information they'd collected.

"Kirino lived with her parents and her little sister, Ofusa. There was a six-year age gap between them; Kirino was twelve and Ofusa was six. Both sisters, as well as their mother, are recorded as having been spirited away, while their father died of an illness. However, in the letter detailing Ofusa's death abroad, her mother seems to be mentioned as well," Tsujimoto recounted. "Maybe Ofusa and her mother ran away together, leaving Kirino stranded on the mountain..." His tone grew heavy with that grave realization, though there was no point in criticizing their actions in the current day. Kirino's tragedy had occurred almost two hundred years before, after all.

Humans had an inherent tendency to arbitrarily judge the worth of others' lives. Unfortunately, whether strangers or family, not all lives were treated equally. In Toshimi's line of work, he'd come across countless people who'd received the short end of the stick in life or been killed for absurd reasons.

"I think I know what we're looking at here. If Kirino was twelve, that puts her past the optimal age for sacrifice. So she couldn't completely merge with the mountain, and her lingering fixation on Ofusa remained as a separate entity."

The notion that child sacrifices should be no older than seven most likely arose from the belief that, until that age, children were in the hands of the gods—the reason being that rates of child mortality were very high before the invention of modern medicine. Thus, by extension, the psychic world considered children to be semi-supernatural beings.

Yet Kirino had been well past the age of seven when she died. Within another year or two she would have been battling her way through puberty and experiencing her first forays into adulthood. There was no way of knowing what had happened between her and her sister, nor what her mother had been thinking at the time. He could hazard a guess based on his previous experience, but the team didn't need to unravel *everything*. Kirino's misfortune belonged to

the distant past.

“So she’s calling out to Ofusa...and that’s pulling living kids in? Do yeh think that’s what’s been making the villagers of Nagaso so scared all these years?” Tsujimoto asked.

Toshimi responded with a nod. The plague that descended upon the village years later no doubt solidified that fear even further. In historical records of the area, the plague was documented in nearby towns during the same period. In other words, the “cursed” plague wasn’t actually a curse at all: those who survived the famine suffered poor immunity as a result, making them the perfect victims of a vicious contagious disease.

“I reckon so,” Toshimi agreed aloud. “I couldn’t tell you exactly why it turned into a game of tag, but...maybe they challenged her to a game and just...left her there.” And so Kirino was abandoned, forever condemned to be a demon trapped in the spirit world and a game of tag without end.

“Yikes,” Tsujimoto sighed, taking off his glasses and running a hand through his short hair. He wiped the lenses on the sleeve of his shirt, a frown on his face.

Toshimi echoed his sigh and stared up at the ceiling in thought. “Still, that means the curse wasn’t caused by her resentment, right? That gives us more flexibility to find a solution for her.” He hoped to lift the heavy atmosphere a little with that silver lining.

If Kirino deeply resented the villagers and had purposefully cursed them, Yasaka Shrine would have failed in its purpose to appease her, thus creating much more work for the Abnormal Disaster Unit. She would continue to curse the villagers, who otherwise had no method of pacifying her, a powerful, vengeful god with all the power of the mountain. If that were the case, they would have no choice but to forcibly cut her off from Mount Kagura, seal the entire area, or destroy her completely. But fortunately, it seemed that *wasn’t* the case—though Toshimi still expected a ton of work in the days to come.

“That’s true,” Tsujimoto agreed. “If Kirino’s just a bit upset, we might be able to get our point across relatively easily. As for the embodied fear, well...that might take a while.”

“I guess we’ll find a way to seal it up or destroy it, but I gotta admit I’m daunted by the prospect of having to purify the whole of Mount Kagura. We should think of a way to gather it all in one

spot.”

They both nodded in agreement at each other. Suddenly, Tsujimoto stiffened, appearing to remember something. “That Narukami guy, uh...Wakatake, was it? Did Karino say anything about him? If they’re ‘carrying’ him back, it sounds like he’s not conscious...”

“Let’s ask Mochida to make another trip out here. Sugihara’s with her husband now, so I’m sure he can leave them with the other hospital staff safely enough.”

Tomoe Central Hospital was the only general hospital in town. It was governed by the city council and therefore employed certain doctors who had specialist knowledge relating to abnormal disasters, as well as a treatment room specifically for patients affected by such calamities. The Abnormal Disaster Unit had transferred the Sugiharas there to be examined and treated.

“Also, I hate to say it, but...” Toshimi grimaced slightly, and Tsujimoto glanced at him with a curious quirk of his eyebrow. “We’ll be in a real tight spot if Miyazawa’s out of action for too long. I’ll brew some medicinal tea for him. Asaka went to buy some lunch, and I reckon she’ll be back soon, so...once you finish eating, please prepare an incantation to contain him.”

Once Tsujimoto puzzled out what exactly Toshimi meant by “medicinal tea,” he burst into a fit of laughter. “*Oh*, aye—your talisman tea will blow his socks off, Yoshida,” he chortled. “That stuff’s so bitter. When Karino drank some this morning, his whole face scrunched up. He said it was more potent than the one Miyazawa makes, haha.”

Toshimi recalled prescribing the tea to Tsujimoto several times in the past, too. Back when the two of them used to go out on jobs together, Tsujimoto had even passed out on a few occasions after exhausting himself during Toshimi’s spartan training. Toshimi hadn’t pushed him particularly hard, though; Tsujimoto simply hadn’t known his limits when they first started teaming up, and he tended to overload himself because he used Toshimi as a basis for how much he should be doing. Thanks to that, Toshimi had really honed his ability to pick up on when one of his colleagues was pushing themselves too hard.

“Oh, yeah. He said Miyazawa brewed some for him before, didn’t he?” Toshimi smiled, putting his by-then-cold teacup up to his lips.

"I'd better boil some more water, then," Tsujimoto chuckled.

"No need." Toshimi stopped Tsujimoto with a shake of his head and rearranged his crossed legs as he gazed out the window.

The sliding glass door at the front of the community center opened onto a roofless veranda. Droplets of condensation clouded the glass, which was unobscured by the storm shutters for once. Beyond the panes, Toshimi could see both the sand-covered plaza and the foundation of Yasaka Shrine. The weather was going to take a turn for the worse in the afternoon, with snow forecast for that evening. The blue sky of dawn was but a faint memory, and the sun's rays shone weaker and weaker by the minute.

"Uh, Manager... How are you going to make tea without water?" Tsujimoto asked.

"Oh, no, no—I mean...those origami charms fly here pretty fast, but time passes about two times slower on the Other Side. Obviously, when they get here depends on how severe Miyazawa's condition is, but we'll get bored of waiting if we're ready too far in advance." Toshimi glanced at his watch. The hands signaled twenty minutes until noon.

It had been about three hours since Tsujimoto first ascended the mountain, but as far as Tsujimoto's inner clock was concerned, it hadn't even been two hours. With the winter solstice swiftly approaching, the sun started to disappear behind the mountains pretty much as soon as the clock struck noon. Considering the worsening weather, Toshimi was in the difficult position of deciding when the team should call it a day.

"Karino's a real shining star, huh?" commented Tsujimoto, following Toshimi's gaze out the window.

Toshimi let his eyes fall back to the note in front of him. The ink blotted the page in a way particular to washi paper, but Karino's handwriting was easy to read and conveyed the necessary information in a succinct manner.

"I guess it all comes from experience," Toshimi agreed with a fond smile. Karino and Miyazawa were almost the same age, and sometimes Toshimi felt as though he were looking at himself and Tsujimoto all those years before. It seemed as if he wasn't the only one who felt that way either.

"...Maybe it's more complicated for Miyazawa precisely because they're the same age," Tsujimoto murmured. How he said it made Toshimi suspect that he'd been comparing his younger self to

Miyazawa for quite a while.

Tsujimoto was also extremely talented, and Toshimi knew better than anyone that Tsujimoto had also gone through a period in his younger days in which he bottled up his worries all alone. Even Miyazawa's stoicism and refusal to complain or voice his distress until he was at his absolute limit reminded Toshimi of a younger Tsujimoto.

"Eh, I'm sure he'll be fine," Toshimi said.

Early that morning, back at the office, Toshimi had given Karino a cup of talisman tea. It was just after they'd been informed that Haruto was missing and the other team members left in a flurry of urgency. Toshimi stayed at Town Hall to work behind the scenes, alerting the unit employees that weren't on the Mount Kagura case to the situation and pulling some strings to borrow Nagaso Community Center for the day. Then, over talisman tea, he and Karino had a short conversation.

"I'm only doing this for me," Karino had said in reply to Toshimi's thanks, smiling although his brow was still furrowed from the tea's bitterness. "That's what Misato would say, anyway," he added, his cheeks slightly flushed. He explained that it was something Miyazawa had said upon bullying him into drinking some talisman tea not too long ago.

"I was sorta jealous," Karino had admitted. "He was all confident and bold, goin' on about how he's lookin' after me because it was what *he* wanted and that he only does things for his *own* sake. Usually he pretties things up and tries to sound more humble, y'know?"

Toshimi saw Karino's youth in the way he scratched the back of his head awkwardly, sheepish and embarrassed to mention his inner feelings aloud. Karino might have an advantage over Miyazawa in terms of combat experience and the art of prioritization, yet when Miyazawa so emphatically stated that he was protecting Karino for selfish reasons whereas Karino had viewed his life as meaningless not long before...Miyazawa must have appeared more than radiant in Karino's eyes.

Miyazawa possessed an indomitable fighting spirit and will to live that wasn't present in Karino; Miyazawa's drive was so strong that he could probably find a way to survive even if the entire world were against him. Of course, that made him somewhat dangerous should anyone get on his bad side, but the fact that he'd

endured such bloodshed proved just how formidable he was.

One other thing Karino had said played in Toshimi's mind: "I mean, I don't really know what we are, like... Yeah, we're housemates at least, and maybe friends at most, but..." He'd trailed off, leaving the rest of his sentence vague and unspoken.

Neither Karino nor Miyazawa had relatives to support them. For Karino, to have someone live right next to him in the same bubble of loneliness affirmed his existence—and that was probably a huge deal to him.

The kettle began to whistle beside Toshimi as clouds of steam erupted into the air. The sky was quickly growing dreary; one would never think the sun was positioned right above them. Staring out into the dismal cold, Toshimi wondered whether the Other Side might actually be more comfortable.

"Wanna go make sure Ookubo isn't too cold?" Toshimi suggested. He picked his phone up from the table and stood.

"I'm a bit cold, too, so I'd rather brew us some tea," Tsujimoto laughed, rising along with Toshimi before heading toward the dirt-floor kitchen near the entrance.

Toshimi slipped past Tsujimoto, who was filling another kettle with water, and ventured into the wintry outside world, setting his sights on Yasaka Shrine. The northerly wind that whipped up from behind the shrine stole the remaining warmth from his clothes. He gazed up at the desolate, cold, quiet mountain, its atmosphere serene and dignified in spite of the concrete retaining walls fencing its foot. His line of sight dropped once more, and he refocused on Yasaka Shrine.

"Hmm... I should ask for more details before I decide what to do next," he mumbled to himself as he nimbly hopped up the stone steps. At the top waited Yasaka Shrine with all its doors open. Deep in the inner sanctum, the shrine bell rang incessantly, signifying the presence of his teammates within.

RYOUJI entrusted Wakatake and Misato to Yoshida, who'd kindly come to meet them at the rift. Then he immediately retraced his steps back toward Mount Kagura to continue his search for Katsuki.

Unlike Misato, Ryouji had no connection to Katsuki. In fact,

he'd never even seen the kid in person. It would be a trial to sniff the boy out using his abilities alone. On their way back down the mountain, however, Misato had theorized that Wakatake would have implements to specifically track Katsuki on his person. Sure enough, after patting down Wakatake's limp form, Misato uncovered something that looked like a geomantic compass—which they quickly pocketed. The device seemed to point toward Katsuki's location, so using that, Ryouji trudged on his own through the shrubbery, bamboo grass, and fernery that dogged his steps.

"Y'know, I'm surprised he's hangin' so close to the foot of the mountain," Ryouji grumbled to himself with a wry chuckle. Undergrowth usually thrived in places with a lot of sunlight, hence its prevalence on the gentle gradient at the foot rather than the steep slopes in the mountain's midst. Yet, no matter how far he hiked, Ryouji was wading through various weeds and grasses.

Misato hypothesized that the peak altered its environment depending on the desires of who walked it. For example, if someone wanted to hide somewhere on the mountain, swathes of trees would accumulate and group together to conceal them. But if the person wanted to be found...

Don't tell me that's why the whole place has good visibility. It's like I could exit at any moment.

Ryouji scratched his head with the hand holding his khakkhara, its rings jingling. He'd sort of gotten the impression before, but...it appeared the next Narukami head really was a clingy kid. "I guess that's what happens when Misato's been doting on ya 'round the clock, huh?"

Ryouji couldn't care less if Misato had an unfavorable opinion of himself; from Ryouji's point of view, he seemed to be the kind of guy who soon became overprotective of people he liked and who enjoyed looking after and pampering them. He was a softhearted goofus and easy to get along with.

Because the one who constantly talked Misato into helping him with chores and accompanying him for petty reasons on a regular basis was none other than Ryouji himself. He'd long recognized that Misato was a dumbass inherently too caring for his own good—even if he had just given the man a long, drawn-out scolding (that he was beginning to worry had been a tad too harsh, since Misato had gone uncharacteristically quiet and docile on their walk back).

At some point, it had become an unspoken arrangement that Misato cleaned the bathroom and toilet. He even occasionally did Ryouji's laundry when washing his own clothes. Yet he never used his help as an excuse to miss his rent payments or ask Ryouji to lower the already-low price—and merely alluding to his prior late payments had Misato eager to assist Ryouji with odd jobs like peeling chestnuts or drying persimmons. At heart, he obviously and naturally thrived on being dependable, making him the very epitome of a good older brother. He went on and on about being selfish and whatnot, but Ryouji wasn't convinced by his poor attempts at persuasion.

Come to think of it, he said that saving me and taking care of me was all for his own sake, too.

Still, that in no way diminished the gratitude Ryouji felt toward Misato for saving his life and caring for him when he was unwell. He thought Misato's attitude about taking responsibility for one's actions was admirable, even.

As Ryouji pushed through the brush, that debate waging in his mind, the compass needle suddenly began to waver uncertainly. He shook himself and swiftly set his senses to scouring his surroundings.

In the gloom of a thick, luxurious evergreen shrub, the grass seemed to move unnaturally. If Ryouji concentrated, he could just about make out a presence—and it wasn't an animal's, but the energy of a highly powerful psychic. It was noticeably different from Misato's—his brother's—in that its aura was lively at best and unstable at worst. It felt like a flame that could fan into a full-scale blaze at any second.

...Seems like he's more mature than I expected, huh?

From what Ryouji had heard, Katsuki Narukami had grown up in a rather oppressive environment. Ryouji had been vaguely anticipating a sad, beautiful boy who chafed and railed against the shackles that bound him. However, unlike Misato's aura, his was not the energy of someone who bottled himself up in order to accommodate others. Ryouji saw that fact as something like proof of what kind of a brother Misato had been to Katsuki; he wasn't a controlling figure that forced Katsuki to unhealthily rely on him, but more akin to a shield or breakwater that protected Katsuki.

"Hmmm..." Ryouji hummed for a while in thought before concluding that none of that mattered at the moment. He decided to

change his strategy: rather than erasing his presence so that Katsuki wouldn't run away from him, he'd approach Katsuki head-on and call out to the boy directly. He would play Misato's role for the time being.

Ryouji shamelessly clawed his way through the undergrowth and closed in on Katsuki. Noticing the sound of his footsteps, a silhouette peeked out from the shadowy shrubbery and glanced up. It was a casual, barely wary movement that most definitely wasn't the behavior of someone genuinely on the run.

Sorry I'm not your brother, kid.

The boy's expression fell in a blatant mixture of disappointment and caution when he laid eyes on Ryouji. Ryouji couldn't help but smile awkwardly in the face of his honesty. He looked just like the picture Wakatake had shown Ryouji; his facial features were gorgeous albeit in a different way from Misato's, his looks leaning more toward the embodiment of textbook pretty boy.

"You're Katsuki Narukami, ain'tcha?" Ryouji greeted him. "I'm Ryouji Karino, and I'm a local psychic the clan sent to come find ya. I think you already know, but one of 'em came out here to take you back. Let's get off this mountain now, aight?"

Be gentle and friendly, he repeated to himself as he spoke in the softest tone he could muster. Unfortunately, he'd never exactly learned how to speak in a refined and polite manner, so the best he could do was make sure Katsuki felt heard and respected in a way that wouldn't injure the kid's pride.

Katsuki's reply came in the form of a look of disgust that he made no effort to hide whatsoever. "No. I'm not leaving," he stated with an air that undeniably said "I'm the Narukami son and I'm sulking right now."

It was a firm rejection that brooked no argument. It seemed that Katsuki would refuse to leave unless his brother was the one who came to plead with him. Ryouji felt like he was moments away from being told "Begone, peasant." He scratched the nape of his neck awkwardly, carefully weighing his next words before propping his khakkhara on his right shoulder and settling his left hand on his hip. Katsuki's pretty frown only deepened, the boy wholly unimpressed.

"C'mon, my guy..." Ryouji sighed. "Me, that Wakatake, Misato... Basically everyone's been out lookin' for you. Didn'tcha come all the way to Tomoe cuz you wanted to see Misato? He's

waitin' for you right at the foot of the mountain, all ready for ya."

Katsuki's naturally chestnut-colored, fluffy hair appeared to stand on end as if he were a threatened cat. His slim shoulders flinched slightly at the mention of Misato's name. After a moment of hanging his head and pursing his lips, Katsuki bitterly spoke into his shoulder, his voice low. "No one's searching for me because they're *worried* about me," he spat. "Not you, not the Narukamis... not even my brother."

Ryouji simply stared in a dispirited daze; that was the last thing he expected Katsuki to say. He regarded the cowering boy with deliberate consideration. If managing to keep from saying, "The hell you talkin' about?" was worthy of praise, then Ryouji thought he was doing a pretty good job if he did say so himself. He scratched his head yet again, balancing his khakkhara over the back of his shoulder to keep his fingers free.

What could've given him that idea? Misato... What the heck did you say to him? Compared to others, Misato usually did a good job of getting his point across. Ryouji was starting to regret not asking for a more detailed account of what had happened.

"Oh, uh... I dunno what Misato said to you, but I know for *sure* that he's super worried about you. Somethin' happened and he can't come all the way out here at the moment, so I said I'd come get you in his place. But lemme tell ya—he's at the foot of the mountain worried sick about you. Let's go down there and talk it out, aight?" Ryouji suggested with a hopeful lilt.

"Shut up! What the hell would you know about me and Misato?!" snarled Katsuki. "My brother isn't that sort of person! He's not cruel, or inconsiderate, or..." His fists balled, trembling in conjunction with his outburst, his cheeks flushed. Ryouji thought he could even see tears pooling in the corners of Katsuki's eyes.

But Katsuki's words made absolutely no sense to Ryouji; without the missing context, he had no idea how to console the kid. "Uh, I think you might've misunderstood somethin—"

"As if you'd know! I...I don't have a brother anymore!" Katsuki interrupted scathingly. "All you people can invent your lies and try to be all nice as much as you like, but in the end, you're just manipulating me for your own convenience!"

This damn brat. Ryouji opened his mouth to retort but forced himself to swallow the words that played on his tongue. He wasn't really the most patient man to begin with—and the kid knew how

to push his buttons. *I'm this close to losing it!*

All right, yeah, he's a damn spoiled brat...but yelling about it ain't gonna do nothin'.

Ryouji's limited supply of gracious, compassionate words was running low confronted with a kid who was acting as if he were the loneliest, most unfortunate person in the whole world. His left hand instinctively reached into his pocket to seek out his box of cigarettes.

The boy in front of Ryouji was screaming "Pay attention to me! Love me!" with his entire body. When he said that he "didn't have a brother anymore," he probably meant something more like "I don't have a brother who'll dote on me and bow to my every whim anymore." It was a wonderful thing that Katsuki felt free enough to throw such a tantrum without hesitating or worrying about what others would think of him. That was what Ryouji kept telling himself, anyway.

"That's why there's no reason for me to go back to the living world. Who cares about the Narukami clan? They only need me because I'm next in line to be head of the family. And if I leave, I'm sure they can just find a replacement," Katsuki huffed scornfully.

Ryouji's last, worn thread of patience finally snapped. "Stop actin' like a spoiled child, you little brat!" he boomed. "If that's what you genuinely think, why're you hidin' right at the bottom of this mountain, huh?! Anyone can see that really you just want your big bro to come find you!" He punctuated his accusation with a sharp thud of his khakkhara, the chimes of its golden rings echoing around them.

"Wha—?! Shut up! This is none of your business!" the sheltered boy yelled in disbelief, his voice finally becoming thick with tears. "Me and that girl are exactly the same! Everyone just used and discarded us as they saw fit, justifying it to themselves by pretending it's for the greater good! I always thought Misato was the only one I could trust, but...I was wrong!"

Ryouji produced his pack of cigarettes and tapped at the bottom. He dexterously slipped out a cigarette and propped it between his lips. Flicking his cheap lighter, he took a prolonged, lung-poisoning drag of tobacco. Then, with a heavy sigh, he released the huge puff of smoke into the mist-shrouded air.

"Y'know what?" he began. "You're not the only one who gets pushed around cuz of how unfair the world is. I hate it when people

say to hide your pain cuz everyone's havin' a hard time. I mean, technically, it ain't anyone's business what other people are goin' through. But..." It wasn't as though Ryouji didn't sympathize with Katsuki. And he wasn't going to waste his time delivering a boring, generic lecture about how everyone had their own struggles and motivations to an adolescent boy.

"Everyone lives their lives constantly choosing the lesser of two evils. Even your big bro had to choose somethin' real awful cuz of somethin' even worse—and he survived, hidin' his pain all the while. Right now, all the options you have are pretty lousy too, right? But even if you have to choose something crappy, *you're* the one who chose it, and no matter how lousy it gets, you'll live your life carrying that burden. If ya really wanna choose to run away now for whatever reason, then just know it's *your* choice to live with the consequences."

He wouldn't tell Katsuki to carry the burden all alone like Misato did. But if Katsuki really did choose to remain on the Other Side, the blame would land squarely on Wakatake and the others who couldn't convince him otherwise. Meanwhile, Misato would blame himself for the rest of his life, and someone else would be obligated to take over the Narukami clan under unfortunate circumstances.

It wasn't a case of good versus evil or right versus wrong, but rather the reality that choices always had consequences. There was no way of running from the situation or disappearing entirely that wouldn't still make a mark on the world somehow. In Buddhism, that concept was known as *pratityasamutpada*, a key doctrine based on chains of causality.

Katsuki's options were themselves the result of other people's actions in a huge web of causation, and thus, in turn, the choice Katsuki made would change the course of someone else's life and alter their environment. No one truly lived totally according to their own will; at one point or another, everyone faced a decision.

Ryouji puffed on his cigarette irritably as he gave his lecture while Katsuki glared at him with doubtful eyes. The boy's expression gave the impression that he couldn't care less. Yet no matter how vehemently Katsuki insisted that nothing was his fault and that everyone else was to blame, he could never escape the effects of his own choices. That was Ryouji's philosophy of life. Technically.

Although... That's true. I guess this moment right now is part of my chain, too, huh? He'd ended up in his current position after Misato fled to Tomoe as a result of choosing the lesser of two evils. Ryouji had floated all the way out to Tomoe like a kite with no string to inherit a family home he had no memory of nor any intention of inhabiting. Then, in a culmination of their two fates, Ryouji had invited Misato to board in that very house.

And so Ryouji and Katsuki stood face-to-face in a situation that never would have come to pass had anyone in the world made a different decision somewhere up the line. Fate was not divine but rather the result of a never-ending chain of mere coincidence.

Therefore, in a way, it was fate that had brought Ryouji and Katsuki together. That moment existed at the end of millions of interlinking choices rather than as a consequence of something like blood ties or destiny or anything else that could be defined by a more comprehensible, single term. The same went for every other person Ryouji had come into contact with and then drifted from. He never thought to label or give special names to those relationships; they were gone as quickly as they came.

...It's not like I don't wanna put a name to 'em, though.

He just didn't want to see something he'd given a name to come crashing down. If he acknowledged a relationship, that made it all the more certain the bond would one day break. Ryouji was scared of labeling his relationships precisely because he yearned for the sort of personal ties that couldn't be broken even if he tried—and he was well aware of that, too. He was a coward.

With a sharp inhale, Ryouji smoked the last of his cigarette and tossed the end to the ground, digging his toe into the stub just in case. He abruptly picked his khakkhara back up from where it was sticking upright in the earth. Its rings jingled in response.

“But luckily for you, on this occasion I’m on strict orders from your sickly sweet, stupidly adoring big bro who literally thinks the world of you.” Ryouji grinned as he let out a nasty cackle.

Katsuki shrank away, his brow furrowing as he assumed a defensive stance.

“For his sake, I’m draggin’ you with me whether you like it or not. Ya think you can make a run for it? You’re welcome to try,” Ryouji sneered. “Sorry, but I can’t *stand* spoiled little brats like you. I’m boutta go all out!” He roared gleefully as he kicked off the ground in a sprint. Just like he’d promised Misato, he was going to

drag that kid back down the mountain even if he had to knock Katsuki out and carry him.

As Ryouji rallied his energy to fulfill that oath, Katsuki stood before him with moist eyes that widened into perfect circles as if he were a deer caught in headlights.

Chapter 13: Goodbye

“HOW are you doing, Miyazawa?” Yoshida asked.

Misato was lying on a makeshift bed of floor cushions in the corner of the community center, tucked behind an improvised partitioning screen (which was actually just a folding table propped up on its side).

“Mm, yeah. All right,” Misato replied vaguely, rousing from his nap. He peeled off the blanket wrapped around his body and sat up. He scraped his loose hair back into a haphazard ponytail. The heater by his feet was warm and cozy.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Yoshida said, pushing the table-screen aside.

Misato folded up the blanket and kneeled with his hands resting on his thighs. He glanced at his watch to see it was just past three in the afternoon. It had been before noon when he descended the mountain and met up with the others to share information. And by the time he’d eaten some lunch and settled down, it had been just before half past one—meaning he’d been asleep for about an hour and a half. His body felt much lighter after catching a few winks.

“Hi, Manager. I’m feeling a lot better now.” Misato smiled with a light nod as Yoshida bent to take his pulse in his neck and wrist.

“Your pulse is definitely a lot stronger.” Yoshida nodded in approval. “Let’s change the talisman on your arm and brew you another cup of talisman tea. Then I think you’ll be all set.”

“Okay,” Misato murmured with a pathetic smile and no courage to voice his displeasure with the idea. He’d been well and truly threatened with the tea by Ryouji, and the sheer bitterness of Yoshida’s brew warranted Ryouji’s warning. Still, the tea’s terrible flavor was redeemed by its tremendous efficacy.

Technically, the wound Misato suffered required a few stitches, and after disinfecting the gash, Yoshida had sealed it up with a talisman that held open wounds closed. The talisman would lose its effect if he did anything too strenuous but could apparently

handle most movements.

"We're all ready outside. Tsujimoto's just getting changed. We should probably leave before half past three, so could you be ready by then?" Yoshida informed him. "I already got the implements we'll need ready. It'll probably be a cold journey back, but at least it won't be dark or cold on the Other Side, so don't worry 'bout putting anything warmer on."

"I really am sorry about all this..." apologized Misato glumly, embarrassed that his own failings had obligated Yoshida to plan such a thorough response.

"No, no, don't give me that," Yoshida replied. "Whether this strategy succeeds all depends on your performance, Miyazawa; naturally, we have to make sure all the conditions are right for you. It's just like doing maintenance on a Formula One car about to start the final race."

Misato blushed slightly at that. He smiled, a squirming sensation tugging at his gut to be compared to something so renowned.

Surprisingly, Yoshida continued to speak in a low, serious tone. "Usually, I'd tell you to hang back and just concentrate on rest and recuperation. But there are only a few of us out here, and as you're aware, we're understaffed to begin with." He sighed. "As your manager, I can't tell you to do anything reckless. I take full responsibility for that. It's also my job to make sure we play things as safe as possible to reduce the risk."

Misato was the one primarily at fault for putting himself in such a difficult position. Yet he could only further endanger the team if he tried to resolve everything on his own. And what if he just made things worse? He internally sighed at his shortcomings. No matter how many times he apologized, his regret could do nothing to change the situation. The only way he could help was by ensuring that the same thing didn't happen again.

"I understand. Thank you for everything," Misato replied. He nodded, then pulled himself out of his self-castigation. He *would* get the job entrusted to him properly done. To that end, he had to accept all the support that was available to him. He could reflect on his deficiencies after it was all over.

"I'll send a message to Karino to ask for his cooperation, too. We've still had no word that he's on his way back with Katsuki, and if we just sit around waiting, we run the risk of getting *nothing* done

today.”

From what Ryouji had told them about how human fear comprised the core of the bean-weevil-shaped miasma, they’d managed to piece together almost every aspect of what was causing the curse of Mount Kagura. Yoshida had decided that if they were to end the curse, they first had to do something about both the demon and the miasma. For that reason, they were asking Ryouji to sideline the search for Katsuki and instead assist them in exorcising the mountain.

“Of course,” Misato conceded. If they could get rid of the demon, it would be a lot less dangerous for Katsuki to be on the Other Side. Plus, they didn’t exactly have the resources to wait at the mountain overnight, whereas for Ryouji and Katsuki, only half of that time would have passed within the spirit realm.

Near the warmth of a heater, Misato stripped off the shirt he wore and held his right arm out to Yoshida. Tsujimoto had lent him the shirt since his own was torn and covered in blood, and it sagged off his shoulders due to its somewhat larger size. They’d done their best to wash his jacket before the bloodstains set, so that was hanging up to dry in front of the heater. Misato dragged his gaze away from the startlingly grotesque laceration on his arm. He didn’t feel any pain, however.

Once they finished changing the talisman and bandaging, Misato put Tsujimoto’s shirt back on only to be immediately confronted with a cup of talisman tea. The liquid was a mysterious miracle medicine that had a taste so potent that one could hardly believe it was merely the watered dregs of a burnt-up talisman. An amused smile played on Yoshida’s lips as he held the mug out to Misato.

“Yoshida...” Misato began after choking down a sip of the tea, his face contorting. There was no pretending the taste didn’t bother him. “Is this a secret formula you came across somehow? The talisman tea I know tastes completely different...”

“Hahaha! You got me.” Yoshida grinned. “It’s from the mountain where I did my training. Packs a punch, huh? I heard that you’ve made some of your own before and treated Karino with it.”

Ryouji must’ve mentioned that when he drank Yoshida’s tea earlier that morning. Misato nodded, to which Yoshida responded with a smile.

“Karino’s grown pretty used to Tomoe by now, hasn’t he?” he

commented. "I was wary of him back when the inugami incident happened, but...it's reassuring to have him on our side."

"Definitely. I owe a lot to him. He gave me a real scolding for what happened today... Hahaha," laughed Misato awkwardly, scratching at the back of his neck.

The difference in both combat and life experience between the two young men was stark. The day's events had really hammered that fact home for Misato, forcing him to face his own naivety. His behavior had worried others and created more work for them ever since he discovered that Katsuki was missing. He'd refused the help proffered him and consequently almost met his end. It had been very eye-opening.

"Hey, don't lose heart. You keep each other in check, don't you? I think that's a good thing." Yoshida chuckled at Misato's miserable expression and drooping shoulders.

The combination of the bitterness in Misato's mouth and the acidity in his heart made for a real look of dejection. "Ryouji's good at looking out for me. Well—he just has a warm heart in general, really. It just feels like I constantly take advantage of that."

"That's not what Karino thinks. Personally, it seems like you two have something good going on. You both respect one another, and you both jump at the chance to help each other out. What matters isn't who's better or who's right... It's that you both want to be there for each other and don't force yourselves to do anything out of obligation. I suggest you take really good care of what you have. That's what makes you two such a good match."

Misato mulled over Yoshida's unusually long speech as he—somehow—drained his cup of talisman tea. Yoshida rarely ever alluded to what went on in Misato's private life. Misato had always thought of the man as someone who went to great lengths not to overstep his professional position as manager or mention anything personal that Misato didn't bring up himself.

Yoshida sat back on his heels, smiling at the look of shock on Misato's face. "Maybe one day you'll both go your separate ways and have your own families. But for now, I think it's a wonderful thing to be with someone who can mutually support you."

Misato's relationship with Ryouji worked precisely because of who they were; it never would have gone the same way with somebody else. Neither of them had anyone they relied on quite so much as each other—for better or for worse.

They were together. In the darkness of the same deep, unknowable waters, they were together.

“...You’re right. Thank you, Yoshida,” Misato said as he returned the man’s smile. Yoshida’s warm words and warmer features worked their way into the pit of his heart, changing his perspective.

He gazed at Yoshida’s back as he rinsed his teacup in the kitchen. *This must be what it feels like to have a real father, huh? The way he looked at me was kind of paternal somehow.*

The distant noise of an engine cut through the quiet, and Yoshida quickly stuck his head out the community center door. Misato’s eyes followed. Thick, snow-laden clouds enveloped the dark world outside. The forecast had said the snow would start in the evening.

Figuring there wasn’t a moment to lose, Misato retied his hair with purpose. He shrugged on his frayed jacket, then checked that his bag was stocked with everything he’d need before hooking it on his belt. Upon remembering that his tessens was no longer functional, he tried to hide the slump of his shoulders. He left the community center, trailing after Yoshida. When he recognized the man standing beside Yoshida under the eaves, he called out, “Oh, Tsujimoto!”

Tsujimoto was the one who’d been driving the car. He’d changed his clothes while away and was clad in a black priest’s robe with a *wagesa* stole adorning his shoulders. He smiled at Misato. “Hiya, Miyazawa. How’re yeh feeling? Did Yoshida’s tea work wonders on yeh?” he said in friendly greeting. He was clutching the implements they’d spent the past two hours assembling.

Misato nodded in reply.

“That’s great,” Tsujimoto responded cheerily before turning to Yoshida. “Apparently Ookubo just received word from Karino. Says he found Katsuki. I brought the message over with me.”

“Ah-ha. Thank you, Tsujimoto.”

Yoshida and Tsujimoto swiftly updated each other on the current situation, then beckoned Misato over to walk to the shrine with them. The plan went like so: Misato and Tsujimoto would enter the other side of Mount Kagura together and separate the adzuki bean weevils from the demon girl. Then, once they cleaned up the miasma, if they could extinguish the demon—Kirino—the

threat of disease or abduction via the adzuki beans would disappear completely. The spirit realm and large number of nawame would most likely remain due to the mountain's inherent spiritual power, but their plan would at least vanquish the risk of the nearby villagers getting cursed.

Misato would function as their bridge to Kirino. He shared her feelings of dependency, fixation, hatred, and love toward a younger sibling. He knew that Kirino's mother had chosen Ofusa over her—yet nobody knew why. Those resonating thoughts and emotions between the two were what had allowed the bean weevils to so readily infiltrate Misato's mind. The night before, Kirino had wormed her way into a corner of Misato's heart as he searched for Katsuki. Misato would use that same link to trace his way back to Kirino instead.

"Are you all right with Katsuki's situation, Miyazawa?" Yoshida asked a final time, referring to the method with which Ryouji had secured Katsuki. Misato gave a firm nod, and Yoshida sent a message charm flying back to Ryouji.

"I'm countin' on yeh," Ookubo said as they passed through the rift he guarded. He clapped a rough hand on Misato's shoulder.

"Got it." Misato smiled, lingering by the rift entrance. "I know I can get through to Katsuki. Let's do this."

And with that statement of hope, Misato stepped into the Other Side.

IT took an instant for the gangster-looking psychic who dared mention Misato's name to pin Katsuki to the ground. The man laughed fearlessly, pulling Katsuki's arms taut against his spine before anchoring his elbows to his back with a khakkhara staff. Utterly paralyzed, Katsuki could just barely twist his neck enough to glare at the psychic.

"Hah. Thought ya wouldn't be too keen," the psychic said with a nasty, lopsided grin.

Katsuki's foot throbbed from where the man had knocked him down with a sharp kick to a pressure point. Wielding the khakkhara as if it were an extension of his body, the thug had defeated Katsuki as easily as taking candy from a baby.

Damn it! I'm supposed to be good at martial arts!

He'd toppled to the earth with his hands restrained behind his back, so he'd hit his chest and chin pretty hard against the ground. The impact must've hurt his mouth; the tang of blood and the gritty soil mixed together on his tongue. Rocks and twigs poked uncomfortably through his school uniform.

"Gh!" grunted Katsuki, various pains afflicting different parts of his body. "Let...go of me...!" he managed to squeeze out.

"Sure I will—if you agree to follow me back down the mountain. C'moon, you know you wanna. Repeat after me: 'Okay, mister! I'll do whatever you say!' Ya got that?" The psychic cackled, a lit cigarette resting between his teeth.

There's no way my brother would pick someone so vulgar to fetch me in his place. Absolutely no way.

"Get lost!" Katsuki barked, squirming and struggling only to end up kicking thin air. "Who the hell would wanna go along with someone as crude as you?!" Katsuki's pride simply wouldn't permit him to beg some random sham of a psychic for mercy. He gritted his teeth and glowered at the man, a rock scraping his cheek, and the thug merely returned the gesture with an amused smile. His mean, foxy eyes narrowed in scrutiny behind his slightly tinted sunglasses.

"Welp, you're *definitely* a Narukami, huh? That pride of yours is already full-grown—unlike the rest of ya." Every single syllable of those last few words was sharpened by a bitter, scathing tongue.

Who the hell does he think he is? Rage boiled within Katsuki. He pursed his lips in frustration, before the beat of wings flapping above his head interrupted his anger.

"Oh? That's gotta be a message from the manager," the psychic said, catching the dove-shaped charm in one hand. In the next second it reverted to an origami bird.

Katsuki had noticed the man dispatch a similar charm not long beforehand, so he guessed it to be a reply. Silence persisted for a moment as the man scanned what was written within while still perched on top of Katsuki. Actually, no—it wasn't exactly silent. The psychic muttered every now and then, grating on Katsuki's nerves with each "Whoa" and "For real?" that issued from his lips.

"It's from Misato. He says they're on their way to get rid of the demon, so I should get over there, too. In the meantime, I gotta leave you here. Sorry. I'll come back for ya when it's all over. Be

good, won'tcha?" the thug announced once he finished reading. He promptly reached into his bag for some rope and started to wind it around Katsuki's limbs.

He's got to be kidding.

Katsuki jerked away, his clothes damp from the soil as he writhed in a final attempt to escape.

"Don't wear yourself out. A pipsqueak like you ain't gonna get anywhere against *my* restraining techniques," the psychic sighed. "I bet you've only ever learned elegant, sophisticated karate moves, huh? Maybe you put on the occasional martial arts performance? Even your clumsy-ass big bro can do better than that."

The man knew exactly how to push each and every one of Katsuki's buttons—and the fury brewing in his gut was proof. The man had insulted Katsuki, mocked his brother, and threatened to "get rid of" the poor girl who'd been left behind by her family. Katsuki couldn't stand anything the cocky, sneering thug said.

Who cares about this guy and his giant, nonsensical lectures? huffed Katsuki to himself. Most importantly, he wasn't going to let the man harm the helpless girl. Definitely not.

"Just shut up!" Katsuki growled. "You have no idea what that girl's been through! Or even how she became a demon in the first place! I mean, she forgot her own *name*! Do you have any idea what she'd have to go through to be so...so...!"

Why is everyone so heartless? How can they just dismiss such a sweet and innocent girl as nothing more than a demon?

Clenching his teeth and seething in frustration, he didn't notice the psychic's eyes widen marginally in wonder.

Katsuki could admit that really, he wanted Misato to come find him. He just didn't want to accept that his brother had changed.

"Heheh," the thug of a psychic chuckled. "All right then, My Lord. You can lie there and cry your li'l heart out while you wait for your big bro to finish the job an' come to collect you, yeah? Well, or...you could come, if ya think you can. If you have the guts to turn on your bro and protect the demon. ...I bet you could fly right over to li'l Kirino. You're havin' your teenage rebellious phase after all, ain'tcha?"

The man began to walk away. Katsuki wriggled like a caterpillar against the restraints, his skin rubbing into a mixture of decayed leaves, twigs, and weeds. At the other end of his pointed glare, the khakkhara-wielding psychic disappeared beyond a

thicket.

“Get *back* here, you bastard!” roared Katsuki, somehow managing to maneuver his bound body into a sitting position. Although his hands were tied behind his back, the rope had *just* enough slack that he could form a mudra with his fingers. “You’ll regret underestimating me! Namah samanta vajranam ham!”

With a *whoosh*, flames engulfed the rope. One by one, each strand turned to ash until Katsuki could at last rip his limbs free and rise to his feet. He pushed off the ground in an angry sprint, his fury propelling him forward.

Wait... “Kirino”? *Did they find out her name? That’s great news, but they’ll use it to exorcise her unless I get there first!*

Inhaling a huge breath, Katsuki uttered the girl’s name for the very first time. “*Kirino!*” he bellowed. “Where are you?! I’ll protect you! Kirino! Please—answer me!”

He ran and ran. Katsuki was the only one in the world who could protect her—the only one who actually considered *her* feelings.

If Misato won’t listen to me, I’ll just have to look after her myself!

Once he’d gotten over the shock of running into his brother, he’d remembered what was truly important. Admittedly, he’d come to Tomoe to see Misato again—yet at that moment, Katsuki was the *only* one who refused to abandon Kirino. Her loneliness, her sorrow, her pure and innocent nature... Katsuki was the only one who really knew her.

I have to stop them!

“Kirino!”

He dove into the knot of trees the psychic had vanished into. Dense, thriving clusters of Japanese camellias crowded him on both sides as he clawed his way through. Then, once the blindfold of camellia leaves finally cleared, he emerged to the familiar sight of Kirino’s shrine.

IN front of Kagura Shrine, a swarm of adzuki bean weevils descended on Misato.

He sliced his way through them with a mudra, dodging their assault and putting more distance between himself and the demon

girl—Kirino. Though he'd undergone Yoshida's excellent treatment, it was a bad idea to overdo things.

"Why're you doing this?!" the girl screeched, squaring her shoulders. The bean weevils buzzed in the air around her, responding to her outburst. "I've never done anything bad, but I'm always the one Mom gets mad at! Does the whole village hate me, too?! What about Ofusa? Ofusa's the only one who...the only one who...!"

"The only one who needed you? Yeah," Misato answered coolly. "You two never had anybody else to play with, did you? You're not wrong about that."

He had to wonder why Ofusa was chosen to be a sacrifice. Perhaps it was because her father had a criminal past: accounts in the village's historical records alluded to a family ostracized by the village due to the father's history of theft. He recalled what Yoshida had said: "I reckon making his daughter the sacrifice was punishment for stealing from the village fields in the past. Since he'd already stolen from the village before, they decided to put the burden of the entire village's theft from the gods on him."

At the beginning of it all was the famine. With nothing to eat, the villagers robbed the straw effigy of the adzuki beans that filled its gut and sated their hunger with the food of the gods. The famine endured, however, and a decimated offering of a few measly beans would not suffice in appeasing the divine. The villagers decided that they needed to dedicate an alternative to the gods, and so Ofusa was selected as a sacrifice to Mount Katura.

Yet, the one who was actually killed was her older sister Kirino, who, in search of Ofusa, eventually ended up luring the children of Nagaso to the mountain. Evading sacrifice, Ofusa fled from Nagaso with her mother, and both died during their travels shortly thereafter.

According to Konomi Sugihara, Kirino had seemed to mistake Haruto for Ofusa as she desperately sought her younger sister. Most likely, *any* children from Nagaso looked like Ofusa to Kirino in her confused, half-deified state. That was what Yoshida and Tsujimoto theorized, anyway.

One by one, children went missing as Kirino called them to the mountain. To make matters worse, a plague ravaged the village. No doubt it was fatal to a huge number of people given that malnourishment had whittled down their immune systems and

resistance to disease.

Thus a new terror began to reign in the starving village of Nagaso.

“Then why isn’t Ofusa here?! Did...did Mom already come to pick her up?! They just left me to be the demon forever and ever and ever!” cried Kirino. “Why would they do that?!”

Her thin arms waved wildly, ragefully, in the air. They really were so, so thin; she’d died in the midst of a famine, after all. Possibly, all of the villagers had looked like that back then. But in Kirino’s case, her meager kimono was tattered and covered in patchwork, and both the hem and sleeves were too short for her. It was easy to imagine her family being the poorest in the village by far.

The swarm of bean weevils pulsated in the air before attacking Misato once more. He threw up a barrier, shunting the insects aside as he ducked.

Yoshida’s words echoed in his mind again: “They must’ve thought it was a curse.”

The villagers of Nagaso probably had no idea that Kirino and Ofusa had ever switched places. That was why the local temple had received pleas to recite a sutra for Ofusa after her ascension to goddesshood.

“Ofusa is already long dead,” Misato replied. “She traveled over this mountain, then far, far away...then she caught the plague.”

He was buying time for Ryouji to find them and bearing the brunt of the bean weevils’ assault while he waited. Tsujimoto was nearby, concealing his presence and preparing for what was yet to come. Misato thought of Tsujimoto and Yoshida’s conversation from earlier.

“I can see why the disappearances quickly became one of the curses of the mountain. But as for what turned the plague into a curse...” Yoshida had said while treating Misato. He looked up at Yasaka Shrine with an analytical gaze. “...I dare say it was fear itself.”

The people of Nagaso were so scared of the disappearances that their fear had given rise to an entirely new curse.

“During the famine, the villagers of Nagaso forced those families who’d been previously ostracized to offer human sacrifices in an effort to make up for the sacred adzuki beans they’d eaten...

which theoretically should have circumvented any lasting consequences. Yet, even then, bad things continued to happen. And when bad things happen, humans automatically try to find a cause. In the end, they manufactured a system of cause and effect that wasn't actually based in reality," Yoshida had explained.

The villagers' fear multiplied when the plague broke out right after the incidences of people being spirited away. Their guilt started to weigh heavy on their shoulders. And spirits weren't composed of only souls who'd passed away—no, the fear, guilt, regret, and paranoia of the living also played a part. The villagers' typhoon of diverse emotions combined with the departed soul to create the epitome of what most would call a vengeful spirit.

The same applied to yokai, too—just like the azukiarai that Hirose searched for when he was a kid. Even if something *did* constitute the legend's core, those who believed in it were the ones who gave it a name (such as "azukiarai"), decided what it looked like, and determined its nature. If no one in the world believed there was an azukiarai that dwelled by the river, it effectively ceased to exist.

Similarly, even though Kirino herself was completely unconcerned with the people of Nagaso, the villagers continued to believe that the vindictive spirit of a human sacrifice haunted Mount Kagura and was cursing them. The fear and remorse they felt as a result assumed a more tangible form, spawning an *actual* curse in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Kirino had been swallowed by the embodiment of those human emotions, overtaken by their curse.

All of a sudden, the treetops rustled behind Misato, suggesting movement.

"*Ryouji!*" a ghostly voice exclaimed gleefully—Shirota. Evidently he'd grown rather attached to their housemate.

"Is he alone?"

"No," Shirota replied simply.

In the same moment, Misato sensed a mysterious, fiery presence. The aura overflowed with energy, just as it always had in Misato's memory.

"Heh." Misato huffed a fond laugh through his nose. "Shirota—go find Tsujimoto, as planned."

Upon command, the white serpent slithered out of Misato's shirt pocket and dropped to the ground. He wiggled away and

vanished among the piles of yellowed leaves, a much smaller size than usual.

“Kirino!” a teenage voice called.

“Hahaha! I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist it, li’l brat!” rang out Ryouji’s voice a second later, seemingly amused.

“Go find Tsujimoto,” Misato told Ryouji, concentrating on the bean weevils. He faced the incarnation of fear that possessed Kirino. It clung to all four of her limbs. It had made a nest of her soul and warped her into the cursed demon she’d become.

Misato formed a mudra and focused his energy. The swarm swirled with violence, undulating at his show of hostility. “I can’t answer your questions,” he asserted firmly to Kirino. “In fact, there’s no one who can anymore. But if you keep behaving like a demon and luring children here, I’ll have to...” He brandished his mudra overhead. He’d managed to land a hit on her not long before, so she cowered in response, the mass of bean weevils separating from her to advance on Misato.

“Stop! I won’t let you hurt her!” A small body leaped from an adjacent cluster of trees to shield Kirino. It was Katsuki, his fiery will blazing furiously.

Misato smiled. “That’s it, Katsuki! You can protect her. Don’t let those insects anywhere near her, okay?!”

His little brother’s eyes widened in surprise.

Misato smiled again, tickled by the dazed look on Katsuki’s face. All while a legion of bean weevils approached. “Let’s deal with this quickly,” Misato said with a sharp breath. “Katsuki—you’re the only one who can protect her.” The moment before the black cloud filled his vision, he just barely glimpsed his brother nod resolutely beyond the haze.

He really has grown up, huh?

“How the hell were you gonna fend off these critters all alone, huh? Show-off,” resounded a tone of disbelief from behind him. Ryouji was keeping the incoming horde of insects at bay with one of his ultrafine barriers.

“Oh. I just thought my oh-so-dependable landlord would sort something out for me.”

“That’s not what I meant when I told ya to leave the rest to me!” Ryouji snapped.

Misato loosed a full, hearty laugh, then retreated back to his oh-so-dependable landlord’s side. “Did Tsujimoto give you the

bag?” he asked.

“This big ol’ sandbag, ya mean? What’s in here, anyway?” inquired Ryouji, maintaining his mudra while indicating the sandbag at his feet with a sharp kick.

“A straw effigy. We need to make sure the bugs stay in their original vessel.”

“Yeah?” Ryouji replied curiously. Misato explained the rest while they worked, hauling the bag into his arms.

“**RIN**, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen! Om kili kili vajra vajri bhura bandha bandha hum phat!”

SNAP. Katsuki’s energy spread in front of the cloud with a percussive noise as he purified his surroundings and generated a barrier. The black haze was repelled, billowing in the opposite direction instead.

He closed his eyes for a second and quietly sucked in a deep breath. Composing himself once more, he turned to the girl he was protecting. “Kirino,” he addressed her, keeping his mudra pointed at the barrier. “Are you hurt?”

The girl looked up at him with an expression of surprised confusion. “Katsuki...” she said uncertainly. “Did you just...say my name?”

“Yeah.” He heaved an exhale of relief, nodding slowly. “See? I didn’t leave you behind.”

“...Yeah,” she agreed.

He didn’t have the nerve to tell her a pompous lie about how he’d stayed behind for her sake or anything like that. He simply gave her a vague smile, then refocused his attention on the black mist. It strayed away from them, appearing to target Misato and the thuggish psychic instead.

“Katsuki,” called a man wearing a monk’s black robe from a short distance away. He had a kind countenance and wore glasses—one of Misato’s colleagues, if Katsuki remembered correctly. With a wry smile, the man made his way over to them.

Katsuki backed up warily, shielding Kirino.

The monk came to a stop. “My name’s Tsujimoto, and I’m from Tomoe Town Hall. I work with yer brother,” he said mildly. “I have

no intention of forcing Kirino to come with us. We wanna properly talk this through, although first we'll need to isolate her from that swarm of adzuki bean weevils. Would yeh make yer way inside the shrine? I already took the liberty of casting a barrier 'round it."

The gentle, smiling man didn't seem to bear any ill intention, but Katsuki still studied him with a watchful eye. Katsuki wasn't the one who'd be in danger if he trusted too easily—Kirino was. Katsuki refused to relax his guard, prompting the man to hum in thought, a troubled smile on his face.

"How can I get you to trust me?" he wondered aloud. "I'm on the same team as Miyazawa—the same team as your brother. If you trust him, would you trust me for just a moment?"

Katsuki hesitated. Indeed, Misato had asked Katsuki to take care of Kirino. "Protect her," he'd said.

When Katsuki finally dropped his arms to his sides, Kirino grasped at the fabric of his blazer nervously. "All right," Katsuki conceded, properly facing Tsujimoto. "Let's talk." He peeled Kirino's fingers from the hem of his blazer and took her hand instead, then led them both to Kagura Shrine. True enough, talismans were pasted on all four sides of the structure, creating a ward that repelled the miasma.

Katsuki wormed through the miniscule entrance, which he was more than familiar with by that point. Just as he was about to beckon Kirino inside, he registered a presence already within.

"A white snake...?"

A snake lay in wait on the wooden floorboards near the entryway. The darkness that normally lingered in all four corners of the shrine was gone; there seemed to be so much more empty space than before. The pure-white serpent was somewhat smaller than others Katsuki had seen, and it happily coiled itself in greeting. He noticed a tiny, folded note fastened to its neck. The serpent appeared to be a spirit of some kind, and Katsuki recognized its aura.

"Misato...?" he said, unsure. Its energy was the same as Misato's, anyway. Perhaps it was some kind of shikigami—though not one of the secret Narukami ones.

It reacted to Misato's name, slithering over and stretching its neck out, reaching toward Katsuki's hand where he kneeled on the floor. He extended his right hand in response and moved to take the note tied around the snake's neck. The moment his fingertips

brushed against its scales, a disembodied voice echoed in his mind.

“Kirino go home.”

It was a fragment of a thought expressed in broken language. Although the same aura as Misato’s emanated from the creature, the cadence of its thoughts was totally different. Katsuki flinched in shock, but the white serpent merely pleaded more urgently.

“Katsuki send Kirino off. Go back to mountain.”

Something clattered behind him. Kirino peered inside the shrine, giving Katsuki a strange look. Katsuki hurriedly stuffed the snake inside his pocket, then walked farther across the tatami to give her space to enter. He realized he still held the scrap of paper clenched in his right hand.

Tsujimoto didn’t appear to be following them inside. When the man had said, “We wanna talk this through,” he evidently meant the snake.

“Shirota...same as Misato.”

Yeah, Katsuki found himself thinking in response, even though he had no idea how or why that would be. Yet, he had heard snatches of gossip that *something* had happened to Misato just before he left the Narukamis.

Did he...consume a venomous snake?

Katsuki was sure it was his fault. It had to have been a situation he’d forced on Misato somehow, in which Misato sacrificed himself for Katsuki’s sake.

“Katsuki?” the girl ventured, her timid voice bringing Katsuki back to reality.

Send Kirino off, Misato was telling him. Basically, he had to put an end to Kirino as the world knew her.

Is there no other way? He hesitated, deliberating over the instruction that had been thrust upon him.

What if the people of this land start worshipping Kirino properly? They could console her properly, and... Maybe everyone could live in peace if the locals started treating her more like the god of the mountain rather than a malevolent spirit. Did he really have to dispatch her from the world as nothing but a lonely, abandoned demon?

The deep, weighty words of that yakuza-looking psychic echoed in his mind: “Everyone lives their lives constantly choosing the lesser of two evils.”

Perhaps Misato had already assessed all the options and had

passed the best possible choice on to Katsuki. In that case, should he trust his brother? Or should he be skeptical and sabotage Misato's plan?

"Katsuki was in mountain. Knows Kirino well." The serpent seemed to be suggesting that Katsuki should be the one to see her off because he'd grown so close to her.

When he unfolded the piece of paper in his hand, he found a charm to release the girl's spirit. If he activated it, Kirino's soul would return to the mountain and her existence as a separate entity would cease to be. He would essentially erase the girl who sat in front of him. That was an extremely difficult decision to get his head around. But... Katsuki gripped the charm in his hand, then stashed it in his pocket.

"Kirino," he called out to her apprehensively. "What do you wanna do now?"

There was a somewhat dejected, vacant look in the girl's eyes. Katsuki frowned; what had Misato discussed with her while Katsuki wasn't there? Or perhaps her blank expression was an effect of having been stripped of the miasma that possessed her, just like the suddenly very empty atmosphere of the shrine itself.

"Is Ofusa really gone?" she asked in a murmur. They had at last arrived at the heart of the matter, together in a place that could've belonged to the present day or to decades long past.

"Yeah. She's gone."

"Gone where?"

Katsuki faltered, unsure of how to express her death. The world beyond? The Pure Land? His hesitation was enough time for Kirino to come to her own conclusion.

"She really did die, didn't she?" Kirino realized.

"...Yeah."

A few moments of silence passed in the dim light of the small shrine.

"Oh..." said Kirino sadly.

What can I say to her to make it better? What matters most to her in the end? Katsuki desperately searched for the right words.

"Everyone's gone, aren't they?" Kirino continued, whispering as she hung her head and wrung her hands in her lap. "Ofusa... Mom...Dad... Everyone always leaves me behind. And you've gotta go back home, right, Katsuki? But I'm just gonna be a demon forever..."

Katsuki reached out to touch her trembling shoulders, then paused, wavering. He couldn't lie to her about leaving. As much as he hated to admit it—especially after automatically lashing out in reply—the psychic's observation was frustratingly on the mark. If Misato wanted Katsuki's help, Katsuki couldn't simply ignore that request. He'd been searching for Misato for so long, after all, craving to hear his brother's voice.

But there was a way to ensure Kirino wasn't left behind any longer.

Right. What I really wanted was to see Kirino finally at peace. He might have claimed that it was for her sake, but truly, it was his own selfish wish. Someone had told him something like that many, many years before. He'd never really understood what it meant, yet at that very second, the implication of such a statement suddenly resonated with him.

After a deep, lengthy breath, Katsuki quietly began to speak again. "No, Kirino—there's a way for you to leave this mountain, too. The game of tag's over, all right? It's time for you to go back home." With renewed determination, he took both of her bony, calloused hands in his own.

Kirino looked up at him, brow furrowed in confusion. "The game's...over?"

"That's right."

"But it didn't even start properly..."

That was the curse that shackled Kirino. When her flesh was supposed to return to the soil and her soul to become one with the peak, she was instead stuck as the demon she'd been branded before her death, never to merge with the mountain and become its god. Time had stopped the moment she was left there to die, her mind frozen on the thought that she was waiting for her little sister to say one word: "Ready."

For one thing, she was already twelve years old—too old for a seamless transition to godhood. Then there's the fact that the sacrifice wasn't carried out correctly, since she wasn't even aware of the situation when she stepped foot on the mountain. Countless factors contributed to Kirino being bound to this earth as a demon. But still...

"That's okay," Katsuki said. "Ofusa already left the mountain, so you can't play. That means you're not a demon anymore, right? You can't play hide-and-seek *or* tag alone. Someone has to be the demon if you want to play—but you can't play with *just* a demon.

Makes sense, right? The game's over, Kirino."

Hider and seeker, runner and chaser—either way, the one who fled *expected* someone to come after them. And without that person, there was no game at all.

Angling his head down slightly, Katsuki steadily held Kirino's gaze as if to persuade her with his eyes alone. He would be the one to send her off. And to do that, he first had to free her from any notion that she was a demon.

"But—" she started to say, her diminutive lips pouting slightly.

"It must be hard having a self-centered sibling, huh? But don't worry," Katsuki assured her. "This time, your mom won't scold you for not listening." Katsuki knew well the hollow, empty feeling of being left to play tag on his own.

Kirino pursued her little sister, and Katsuki pursued his older brother. They were both chasing after siblings who would never come back to them, performing a one-sided game of tag.

Coincidences sure are strange, huh?

He'd sought his brother, desperate to make contact again after Misato was coerced into self-sacrifice on his behalf and faded away into darkness. On that journey he found Kirino—a girl adrift who'd been deserted by her little sister. Katsuki wasn't Ofusa. Even so, he'd been able to connect with Kirino as his genuine self, and there was something he had to make her understand.

"You're not a demon, Kirino. You're not just Ofusa's older sister either. You're yourself. You're *Kirino*." Katsuki looked into her eyes to underscore that fact, suppressing the regrets that throbbed as a dull pain in his chest. Since he'd finally learned her name, he could suffuse his voice with spiritual energy and enunciate each syllable of those truths.

Kirino's bony fingers shook in his hands.

"It's a really sad thing when a sibling who always played with you goes missing. You know, the reason I always played hide-and-seek was because I liked it when my brother found me. That's also why I hated being the demon, so I always forced him to play the game the way *I* wanted to. But then he disappeared, and I didn't have anyone to find me anymore...so I looked for him instead." To drive his point home, he wove a beautiful falsehood with his next sentence. "I bet Ofusa feels exactly the same way. She's looking for you because you never came back."

"Really...?" she said with a tremoring voice, her small nails

digging into Katsuki's palms as if to cling to him.

"Really," he replied, squeezing back.

Even if it's a lie, I don't think that matters so long as it gives her peace. And Katsuki would take full responsibility for any consequences thereof.

"Let's take you home, Kirino. Ofusa, your mom, and everybody else are already there, so that's where you'll be going, too. I'll see you off and make sure you get there safe, okay? You won't get lost again."

As opposed to the village it watched over, Mount Kagura was on the Other Side—a divine realm of both blessing and disaster. Mount Kagura was a place where ancestral spirits resided, where the landscape was sacred and forever unchanging, and where the villagers' souls would one day come to rest. To return to the mountain was to return to the world of the dead.

Katsuki produced the piece of paper from his pocket, handing it to Kirino and wrapping her fingers around it. "It's a charm to make sure you don't get lost," he told her as he began to chant the invocation to trigger the spell. "I beseech thee and ask that you not forsake your mercy. Descend upon me with haste. I pray devoutly to withdraw suffering and grant peace, and to realize harmony with utmost finality!"

The charm activated and encircled Kirino, the outline of her silhouette growing hazy. Katsuki clasped her hand in his and, on his knees, led them both to the entrance of the shrine.

"Tsujimoto ready outside."

Putting his trust in the snake's fragmentary words, Katsuki ushered Kirino outside. As he opened the tiny sliding door that had closed behind them at some point, a dazzling light flowed into the shrine, its soft warmth reminding Katsuki of a clear day in springtime.

"Woow!" Kirino marveled in wonder.

A floral fragrance rode the refreshing breeze that came dancing toward them in a flutter of petals. The petals were around the size of *sakura* petals and painted the space around them with a beautiful, pastel smattering of pinks, yellows, and blues. The scene was most likely an illusion of Sukhavati, the pure land of the Buddha Amitābha, created by Tsujimoto with the help of a sutra. That he was able to summon such a splendid peek into a pure land on his own definitely proved that Tsujimoto was no ordinary Shin

Buddhist priest.

"It's so beautiful!" squealed Kirino joyfully, pointing through the door. "Katsuki! Look, look! The pond's glowing!"

He'd never seen her smile so radiantly before. An indescribable emotion welled up inside him, and he had to compose himself before smiling back at her. "Yeah," he said. "It really is beautiful."

Somewhere in the distance he could just barely hear the tinkling of a charming melody. It was high-pitched and carefree, almost like song. Perhaps its source was a *kalavinka*, a sacred bird believed to roam the skies of paradise.

Kirino excitedly rushed out of the shrine and jumped down to the jewel-covered ground. She tried to carry on running but, still hand-in-hand with a stationary Katsuki, was brought to an abrupt stop. Her eyes gleamed as Katsuki gave her a single, firm nod. He took a solitary step forward, lingering at the threshold. When he exited the shrine, Kirino's tattered kimono transformed into a beautifully colorful garment in the blink of an eye. Her thin hair was swept up into an intricate bun embellished with a gorgeous ornamental hairpin. Kirino gasped and let out another shout of joy as she looked down to witness her breathtaking metamorphosis.

"That really suits you." Katsuki smiled. "I can't follow you there just yet, so I'll see you off from here."

"Aww..." Kirino pouted, her shoulders sagging in disappointment. "Am I really gonna be alone again?"

"It'll be okay," Katsuki reassured her. "Can't you hear that? Someone's calling for you, see?"

"Heeey!" a voice called from beyond. Indistinguishable in many ways, it sounded neither male nor female, neither young nor old. It was the voice of the afterlife.

"Ofusa?!" Kirino replied, letting go of Katsuki's hand.

"Heeey!"

To Katsuki's ears, the voice didn't sound like a young girl's. But Kirino shot toward it, no doubt in her gait. After she'd run a considerable distance, she turned to look back at Katsuki one last time.

"Thanks, Katsuki! See ya!"

"Yeah. See you," he replied as they waved at each other.

See you again soon. That was one of the oldest incantations in history, spoken by people all over the world.

Kirino finally put her arm down and raced away, free, her new

kimono swishing around her legs.

Katsuki trained his gaze on the sight of her receding back, then quietly slid the door closed. An eerie silence rang in the shrine as he was encased in its darkness once more.

Plip. Plip. Droplets splattered to the floor at Katsuki's feet as he hung his head, their timbre the only sound.

Chapter 14: Partners

MISATO ripped the talisman off the top of the sandbag and dragged out the floppy straw effigy. The vessel was just over three feet long, about the same size as a small child.

“Ew,” Ryouji remarked from nearby, still maintaining his barrier. Straw dolls conjured a creepy enough image on their own—never mind one that was several times bigger than normal.

Misato left the effigy on the ground and backed away, dragging Ryouji along with him. “Let the barrier fall, Ryouji,” Misato instructed him. “This thing should suck it all up.”

“Gotcha,” Ryouji replied, and he released his mudra.

Sure enough, the swarm eagerly swooped down into the straw figure as though it had been awaiting that very moment.

“Did ya make a new one of those dolls?” Ryouji asked, nodding his head toward the effigy.

“Yup. We worked out that if the bean weevils were an embodiment of the villagers’ fear toward the sacrificed child, then Kirino wasn’t their source. She was at the heart of Kagura Shrine, and this cloud of fear was housed in Yasaka Shrine.” And the vessel in Yasaka Shrine was a straw effigy, its gut full of adzuki beans to absorb misfortune.

Yasaka Shrine’s founder—presumably an ascetic invited to Nagaso by a local temple—intended for the ill will that arose from the sacrifice’s grudge to transfer into the beans, thereby venerating and placating the child. But in truth, the sacrifice’s grudge hadn’t existed in the first place, and it was the villagers’ own fear and guilt that was causing the people of Nagaso to suffer.

Having absorbed the black mist of adzuki bean weevils, the straw effigy lay in ominous silence. Misato and Ryouji stood at the ready, fixedly watching the doll for any trouble.

Consuming adzuki beans was already forbidden when Yasaka Shrine was erected. That taboo evolved into something like a prayer, the villagers’ superstition becoming what isolated Nagaso from Mount Kagura completely. As long as they never ate adzuki

beans, the mountain would never summon them. As long as they never ate adzuki beans, no one would be cursed by plague. It was a magical safeguard created entirely by the thoughts of those who lived in Nagaso.

Unfortunately, any relief the people felt in upholding the taboo and consequently appeasing the spirits was underpinned by the anxiety that they would be cursed if they erred, allowing the very fear that afflicted them to fester further. Nagaso's remorse and dread funneled into the adzuki beans in Yasaka Shrine, and that maleficence glared down at the village from the foot of the mountain, its dominating presence reminding the people of its existence each time they looked up.

"There's a cursed mountain in the area," the villagers said. "Our predecessors have sinned," they believed. As the symbol of that sin continued to loom over the village, a generational fear took hold in Nagaso. It accumulated in the adzuki beans of Yasaka Shrine over decades upon decades, eventually bleeding into the mountain and gradually eroding Kirino's spirit, which dwelled in Kagura Shrine after her sacrifice.

"The vessel of Yasaka Shrine is a straw effigy made to represent a child under the age of seven. The villagers swapped it out every seven years and filled the new doll with more adzuki beans. Regardless of what the people who started the ritual were intending, it turns out that generations and generations of fear collected in the shrine, snowballing. Seeing as fear isn't a spirit, enshrining and worshipping it did nothing to purify it. That's what that swarm of bean weevils really is," Misato explained.

Earlier, while Misato was sleeping, Tsujimoto gathered colleagues and villagers to fashion a new straw effigy and give the vessel of Yasaka Shrine a new lease on life in accordance with the relevant rituals, although they'd done nothing in particular to the adzuki beans they poured inside it. The plan was to suck up all the weevils and amassed miasma on the mountain with the replacement vessel, then dispose of it all in one.

"Interestin'," Ryouji said with a hum. "So that's why it took the form of a beetle that lives on adzuki beans, huh? I guess more and more of 'em spawned from the decaying beans inside that effigy. That explains why their aura feels sorta...hollow. Cuz there wasn't any vengeful spirit producing 'em in the first place."

"Right." Misato nodded in reply. "That's also probably why it

changed form when it possessed Wakatake. From bean weevils into snakes... I think they probably represented me.”

Yoshida had come up with the theory: to Wakatake, Misato was a source of regret and fear, much in the way Kirino was to the villagers. And when Wakatake first ascended the mountain, he was probably in a state of mind that made it very easy for the bean weevils to possess him. Misato wasn't really sure how to feel about that. He grimaced as he tagged on that last hypothesis, to which Ryouji responded with a hearty cackle.

“Welp, either way, the curse will be gone if we just deal with that big ol’ thing,” Ryouji surmised.

“Exactly. That will stop the plague from coming back, and as for the disappearances... I’m counting on Katsuki and Tsujimoto to do something about that.”

Katsuki and Kirino had spent more than a week in each other's presence. And judging by the way Katsuki leaped to defend her and the way she reacted to him, Misato could see they understood one another significantly.

“I can't tell if you're too soft or too hard on your precious li'l bro,” Ryouji said with a smirk, propping his khakkhara up on his shoulder.

Misato quirked an eyebrow at him. *What's that supposed to mean?*

“Neither,” he replied with a shrug. “He's a trained exorcist, too. It would be weird for me to suddenly take over and deal with the girl myself when he already knows her. I just thought it would go smoother if I left the rest to him. Besides, he's got Tsujimoto for backup, and we had another plan in place if Katsuki decided not to come.”

While Misato and Ryouji occupied the bean weevils, Tsujimoto would've been entrusted with persuading Kirino to leave and purifying her. Things would've worked out even in the absence of Katsuki's involvement.

“*Honestly*. Ya got some nerve tellin' me to convince the kid to step up or to just leave him there if he didn't wanna. The li'l guy hates me thanks to you,” sighed Ryouji in complaint.

“Oh? How I saw it, you enjoyed yourself quite a lot,” Misato huffed, side-eyeing his housemate. “I bet you got ahead of yourself and started picking on him, didn't you? And I've got evidence, too. Perhaps you can tell me why there are scratches on Katsuki's face?”

They definitely weren't there earlier." He hadn't missed Katsuki's dirt-covered blazer either.

"Whoa there. I ain't gonna stir up the hornet's nest," Ryouji said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Misato loosed a sigh that said "What am I going to do with you?" then turned his attention back to the straw effigy in front of them.

"What're we gonna do with that?" Ryouji asked, gesturing with his khakkhara. "Want me to give it a slap?"

Misato nodded. "All right."

With a sharp jingle, Ryouji's khakkhara snapped out, and the purifying flames of Acala engulfed the effigy in a roar of sound.

"...There's no way we can start jumpin' and screamin' like 'Woooo! We did it!' just yet, right?"

Though imperfectly, the conglomeration of fear was enshrined in a place of worship and had been sponging up people's thoughts and feelings for the better part of two centuries.

"Even Tsujimoto said he couldn't purify the whole thing in one go," Misato commented with a bitter smile.

Tsujimoto's weapons of choice were the sutras that passed his lips and suffused his surroundings with an extraordinarily powerful purification. A priest of the Shin Buddhist sect, he hadn't been taught to use incantations as Misato had. Instead, his voice possessed an exceptional might, and he claimed that if he called on Sukhavati in a chant, he could instantaneously make an image of the pure land appear to those who heard it.

"It's not like purification won't affect it at *all*, but it would be safest to keep whittling it down. It'll take a lot of time and effort to get rid of completely," Misato mused.

Apparently, even someone as capable as Tsujimoto would have a hard time purging something that had been revered as a god for hundreds of years.

"Come to think of it, can't Shiota just gobble it all up?" Ryouji suggested. Ever since the white serpent had made the inugami its dinner—when Ryouji had spent months figuring out a way to deal with the beast—he'd complained that it was "cheating."

Misato wished it could be so easy. "I thought of that, too, but Shiota doesn't eat humans, y'know? He says we look gross and sour..." Misato said with a laugh. "Anyway, I get the feeling it might be a bad idea if he remembers what humans taste like."

“True that.” Ryouji nodded.

In terms of spiritual energy, Kirino was probably stronger than the fear, given that she commanded the force of Mount Kagura itself. But in her case, they could reason with her. They likely could have talked it out with her themselves if both Katsuki and Tsujimoto weren’t there for some reason. Still, Misato was extremely grateful for Katsuki’s help. He glanced at the shrine; Katsuki and Kirino were probably within by that point.

I hope so, anyway. I might be biased, but I do believe Katsuki will know just the thing to say to Kirino. He’s always been a kind, smart kid. When he jumped out earlier, it was clear he wanted to protect her with all his heart.

As the flames of Acala died out, a view of the unharmed straw effigy materialized. With a slow, dull *thump*, the doll’s arm moved, and it ponderously hauled its body up.

“Well, would ya look at that. It woke up.” Ryouji grinned, poising his khakkhara in the air once more.

Misato grasped a handful of kirinusa from his bag and held it out in front of him. “Ryouji,” he uttered seriously, “I’m not good with close combat. Could you take the front?”

“Leave it to me,” Ryouji announced with another grin. He paused. “...Wait, what about that tessens you bought?”

“I used it for the first time today, and...it’s already broken.”

“Pffft! Seriously? That’s what you get for settlin’ for the cheap stuff!” laughed Ryouji.

“I know, right?” Misato exhaled sadly. “I’ll get a proper one next time. Even if I have to pay in monthly installments...”

“Yeah, for sure. You should do that. I’m sure I can let your rent wait for a bit,” Ryouji offered before turning back to the menacing doll. “All right. It’s finally time to go freakin’ nuts!” he crowed as he jumped from foot to foot, warming up for the imminent fight in high spirits.

Misato had rarely ever fought alongside another exorcist. He was a little scared that they’d perform incongruous incantations, but he trusted that Ryouji would be able to handle it. Knowing how adaptable the guy was lessened the pressure considerably.

“Right. Let’s do this, partner.” Misato smiled.

The effigy’s stomach swelled disturbingly, and something dark red spilled from within. It was a child’s hand.

Misato took a deep, shaky breath, steadying himself. But...for

some reason, Ryouji was staring back at him with a boneheaded look on his face.

“What’re you looking at?” Misato frowned, glaring at him as if to say, “Keep your eyes on the ball!”

“Oh, uh, nah, I was just...” stuttered Ryouji. “I was just thinkin’... You sure brought out the big P word real fast. Like, we’ve never even fought together before. The, uh...‘partner’ thing.” His cheeks burned red in embarrassment.

After a moment, the blush became contagious; Misato could feel his own face heating up. “Oh! Um... Sorry. Maybe it was a bit weird. If you don’t like it, we can—”

“No, no! It’s not that I don’t like it or nothin’! It’s just...”

Several feet ahead of them, multiple, childlike *things* began to crawl their way out of the straw effigy’s gut. The beings dropped to the ground with high-pitched shouts of resentment, their otherworldly timbre so alien that they could be labeled neither groans nor cries. The creatures didn’t resemble Kirino *or* any of the villagers. It was as if the mysterious sacrificial child the people feared in their minds had taken a physical form directly birthed from their horror.

The sight of the two men blushing furiously at one another in front of what looked like a grotesque scene straight out of hell was undeniably comical.

“Um, anyway... Let’s do this!”

“Y-Yeah!”

Unable to bring the conversation to a satisfactory close, they both refocused on the enemy with weirdly strained shouts of encouragement.

I guess that’s just like us, though. Misato smiled, chuckling to himself quietly.

Partner. For all intents and purposes, the word referred to someone he carried out business with. At heart, though, Misato interpreted it more in the sense of someone who made him more capable; there were some things he couldn’t do alone but *could* do with Ryouji—whether at work or in their day-to-day life. In that moment, for example, it meant they were able to take down those monsters together.

“Just to make sure... Those things aren’t actually kids or people, right?” Misato asked, pointing at the gooey, burgundy clay homunculi.

"Nah, they ain't nothin' of the sort—take it easy," Ryouji assured him as he slid his sunglasses down and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "They sure are gross and sloppy, though. I bet they'd give even Shirota a bad case of indigestion."

"All right." Misato nodded, shifting his weight onto one foot and assuming his stance. "Ready?"

There was no reason to hold back. No one to take mercy on. All they had to do was unleash their raw power and pummel the things without a second thought.

"You're on!" Misato's partner bellowed, launching himself forward.

RYOUI'S khakkhara cleaved the air horizontally, mowing down the slow, stumbling clay figures. Meanwhile, bullets of Misato's kirinusa sent one that was trying to latch onto Ryouji's legs flying.

With each *squinch* and *splash*, they crushed another of the gooey homunculi, reducing their assailants to no more than puddles of dark, purplish mucus.

"*Hell*, these things are gross! Get away from me, you little goo-heads!" Ryouji yelped and screeched as he swung his khakkhara around.

One homunculi after another, the straw effigy spawned more and more of the creatures. They'd lost count of how many they'd already destroyed.

"Ryouji, I'm on your left!"

"Gotcha!"

Ryouji lifted his left arm out of the way as Misato barreled past with a mudra outstretched. A mystical blade sprouted from Misato's fingers, and in a single sweep he cut two of the homunculi cleanly in half. Four or five more still closed in on Ryouji, reaching out for him with languid arms. The speed at which they clawed their way forth from the effigy seemed to be increasing by the minute.

Ryouji reacted with a heavy strike of his khakkhara, flagging under their incessant onslaught. He smashed the head of a homunculus advancing on him from the side, and Misato shot pieces of kirinusa at it to make it a double blow.

Taking advantage of their attack combo, Ryouji blasted the homunculi with a wall of purifying flames. Using the fiery barrier as a shield, Ryouji fell back for a moment to join Misato, gritting his teeth in frustration. “Crap! Just how many of these are there?!” he complained.

“If it’s to do with the number of adzuki beans we put in there... Yeah, we might be screwed.” Misato winced. They had poured in around three cups’ worth. He didn’t want to think about how many beans that totaled. Misato laugh nervously as Ryouji let out a guttural groan.

“Do these guys even know what they want? Either way, it looks like they’ve decided that we’re their target,” Ryouji said with a rough sigh.

A horde of deep red homunculi tottered toward them like toddlers just learning how to walk. The creatures’ movements were clumsy and sluggish, so the pair was in no danger of capture so long as they weren’t hindered in any way. All they had to do was keep smacking and hitting. Even so, there was a limit to their stamina.

Misato shrugged. “Beats me. I don’t think fear really *has* a goal, you know? When it’s actually where it’s supposed to be—inside people—it’s supposed to help them escape and find safety. But when it’s like this... Maybe it’s searching for someone to possess?”

“Oh, true. When it invades an actual livin’ person, it gets somethin’ to really sink its teeth into. Like with Wakatake,” concurred Ryouji.

Wakatake possessed a very concrete idea of what his fear looked like. When the miasma usurped his psyche and merged with that conceptualization, his fear was able to manifest as something very distinct: a snake.

“So what should we do, Mr. Miyazawa?” Ryouji asked with a teasing lilt. “If we carry on like this, we’ll be all outta juice way before these guys let up. Haven’t the others finished their business yet?” He glanced over to where Tsujimoto stood peering into the shrine entrance.

The plan had been for Tsujimoto to erect a barrier around the shrine, then lead Kirino to the afterlife with a sutra. When Ryouji last looked over, the monk appeared to be midrecitation, so perhaps he’d finished.

“You might be right; looks that way. We’ve done quite a bit of

damage now, so how about I try attacking the vessel directly again?" Misato suggested, resuming a combative stance.

Ryouji nodded and let his muscles slacken. He was glad for a small break. "Sounds good. Try giving it a good whack."

"Right," Misato said, twisting his hand into the Kuji-in mudra. He slashed the air nine times to start, then concentrated his mental and spiritual energies. "All that is pure shall not be corrupted. Exorcise and purify, O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind—kyuu kyu nyo ritsu ryou!"

His spiritual blade plunged into the straw effigy, tearing at the gloopy gut of the doll. With a low-pitched *glorp*, the effigy spurted a particularly explosive load of goo. For a moment, it looked as if the muddy mass might split apart and disperse. But...

A mouth opened in its middle, stretching into a wide, hair-raising grin. The effigy had morphed the opening ripped by Misato's blade into a huge smile that leered proudly in the center of its midriff. From its hideous face issued a weird, strangled laugh.

Misato instinctively cowered in response. "Oh, boy... You're kidding..." The words spilled from his lips unwittingly, prompting the pools of dark red goop on the ground to stir.

The remains of the clay homunculi the two had defeated were converging and regaining their childlike forms. Chilling cackles began to emit from their mouths, the cacophony of laughter never-ending. Their jeers echoed over one another again and again, saturating the air around Ryouji and Misato.

"Well, crap," Ryouji lamented. "Ya think it's learning? Must be soaking up both of our fear right while we're standin' here."

If they took too long to deal with it, it could very well possess them. Misato groaned, fighting the disgust and dread that crawled up his spine.

"Makes sense," Ryouji continued before going silent for a moment in thought, pinching his chin. "I know. Misato—try sayin' you're scared of manju."

Misato lost his balance for a second, taken completely off guard by the outrageous proposal.

Ryouji's expression was deadly serious.

Misato supposed it was some kind of plan to turn the whole thing into a bunch of manju, seeing as the entity incarnated people's fears. "What?! No! Besides, I'm genuinely scared of manju!" he protested. He'd almost died from eating one, after all. If

the miasma did feed off of Misato, he could actually picture it transforming into manju.

“Hey, you don’t gotta worry! If it really does turn into manju, I’ll deal with it for ya.”

He doesn’t mean he’ll eat it...right?

Struck dumb for a moment by Ryouji’s joke—it was *just a joke, right?*—Misato slumped and rubbed at his temples. At least his joking around had done one good thing: the tension in his shoulders was totally gone.

“Anyway...” he said, pointedly changing the topic. “Putting that strategy way, way to the side... Ryouji. What do you think we should do? I can’t fight it alone.”

The mounds of mud in front of them—which, notably, had not transmuted into manju—continued to cackle and sneer as they gradually regained humanoid shape. Their sheer number was no joke; there were so many of them that if they attacked all at once, it wasn’t clear whether the pair would be able to avoid them.

“Good question,” Ryouji snorted. He crossed his arms. Pursing his lips, he hummed thoughtfully, a pained look on his face. “I’ve never thought for a second I could beat something so freakin’ huge.”

“Really?” Misato’s eyes widened in surprise as he watched Ryouji slump dejectedly.

“Really. All my life so far, I’ve worked out that it’s best to just run away if you ever come across something this stinkin’ *big*. I’m just a tiny, run-of-the-mill freelancer, y’know? I’m in the business to keep my bills paid; it’s nothin’ worth riskin’ my life for.”

Misato nodded sympathetically. Ryouji’s reasoning was professional and practical in a way that only arose through self-employment. Both the Narukamis and the Abnormal Disaster Unit were organizations, so they often went up against mighty foes. To see someone who enforced their boundaries and didn’t take on more than they could chew was a nice change.

“What *should* we do, then?” Misato asked. “Now that you’ve said that, I’m wondering whether it was really such a good idea to take this thing on with just the two of us.”

“Oh, *now* ya realize?” guffawed Ryouji, his khakkhara jingling over his shoulder. “I’m just a small-time conman of a psychic! Can’t you work somethin’ out, Mr. One-in-Five-Hundred Elite Civil Servant?!”

“You’re the one with all the experience!” Misato managed to counter, recalling their first ever meeting in the park. He couldn’t believe Ryouji still remembered that little detail. “You can’t rely on someone who’s only just graduated from college!”

If they let their hearts be consumed by fear, they’d become the perfect prey for their enemy. The two purposefully kept up their silly conversation while they readied themselves for the next round of combat.

Still hooting that awful, grating laughter, the burgeoning clay figures shuddered into motion. Little by little, they grew more rapidly, making strange noises as they started to walk toward the pair. More goo flooded from the effigy’s gut, and from the pool it created rose yet another crowd of homunculi.

“Ain’t no way we can fight every single one of these,” Ryouji groaned in irritation.

“I guess we’ll just have to aim for the vessel,” Misato concluded as he reached into his bag for more kirinusa—but he found nothing. He was out of bullets. “I’m definitely not perfect, but we’ll lose control if this goes on much longer. Wanna go all-out?”

“Oh?” Ryouji replied, raising an eyebrow.

“I could’ve sworn you can use one of the thunder-invoking incantations. The Mantra of Śakra, no?” He’d seen Ryouji use it once before.

“Oh, right.” Ryouji nodded.

“I know a thunder incantation, too. It’s powerful, but the mantra is extremely long, so I barely ever use it. It’s called the Gosenzo. You could say it’s a gift from a very, very, *very* distant relative.” Misato smirked.

The hint wasn’t lost on Ryouji, who grinned right back at him. The Japanese word for thunder was *kaminari*, which was also a homophone for “roar of the gods.” Flipping the phrase around to read “a god who roars,” it became *narukami*. Misato was referring to the god that the Narukami clan revered as their progenitor—a dragon god with control over rain and thunder. The incantation was a secret Narukami art in addition to their mysterious hair-woven shikigami.

“That sounds awesome. If we both attack at the same time, we might be able to fry ’em all together,” Ryouji chuckled, gripping his khakkhara tightly once again. “Aight. I’ll start chantin’ once I give it a stab with my *vajra*. Let’s see this thing off with a concentrated

attack.”

“Right.” Misato nodded firmly.

“I’ll buy ya some time. Once you’re ready, give me a sign,” Ryouji outlined as he took a step forward.

“Got it. You’re up,” Misato said, holding Ryouji’s gaze. They nodded at one another.

“Sure. Just leave it to me, *partner*,” laughed Ryouji before charging forward with a huge grin.

Misato automatically stiffened. *Okay, now I know why he felt so flustered.*

With a slap to his smiling cheeks, he recomposed himself and started to chant. “Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen. O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind, godly heart...”

Clumps of mud descended on Ryouji from all directions as he leaped toward the straw effigy. He pulverized one with the point of his khakkhara, which he brandished in the air with ease, then another with the ring-decorated head. Swinging the staff behind him, he quickly dispatched two homunculi closing in on his back in one fell swoop.

Misato clapped his hands together briskly, a high-pitched *whap* echoing around him before he intoned, “O my fearsome, distant progenitors—in the presence of the great deities Omidzunu and Naruikatsuchi, I utter these words with humility and reverence...”

The air around him began to change. A slight, electric tingle infused the atmosphere with a certain tension, and thin cracks of lightning started to shimmer in the distant sky above. The long strands of Misato’s hair and the extra fabric of his work pants lifted into the air, floating eerily.

Ryouji advanced on the vessel as it produced more and more clay homunculi. At the same time, others jumped at him from behind. He managed to avoid their ambush by slamming his khakkhara vertically into the ground and propelling himself into the air. Hauling the staff free again, he immediately jerked his arm around and sent several flying at once. Then, with his vajra drawn, Ryouji hurtled back down to the ground and plunged the tip into the straw effigy’s face.

“*Namah samanta-buddhanam indraya svaha. Namah samanta...*” Ryouji took a step back and began to chant as well, forming the Śakra Mudra with his fingers.

Misato stepped a few paces closer to join him, the both of

them glaring at the mass of fear collected by Yasaka Shrine.

“May the power of your soul roar with thunder as you walk the canopy of clouds in the divine sky and swiftly bestow a miracle...” recited Misato as he arranged his right hand into the secret Narukami mudra and pointed it at the sky. He caught Ryouji’s eye.

With a simultaneous nod, they began to synchronize their breathing. The pressure in the air intensified, crackling audibly as an electric current surged around them.

“Hear my plea! Purify and cleanse all that bears ill fortune, sin, and impurity...”

“Good and evil alike, the heavens and Buddha regard as one. The three obstacles and the four demons shall eventually bring enlightenment, with the demon world and the pure land built on the same principle. Buddha-nature is indiscriminate and exists within all...”

Misato and Ryouji continued their respective incantations until they paused to look at one another, delivering the same final line:

“Lightning, descend!”

The entire atmosphere shone with a bright, blinding light. A huge thunderclap accompanied the brilliance as a colossal pillar of lightning drew a jagged line from the clouds to the ground right before their very eyes. In the blazing, all-encompassing beam of light, the faint image of two dragons coiled around one another emerged. Then, for just a millisecond, a detonation of thunder so severe it sounded as though the world was falling apart rattled their bones.

Its force was so overwhelming that it shook them to their cores, affording them no time to cover their ears or close their eyes. Clinging to each other for protection against the violent shockwave, Misato and Ryouji hung on for dear life as a lightning strike that far surpassed their expectations racked the earth.

Eventually, its coursing stream of energy started to dissipate, and Misato stumbled backward woozily. The world around them seemed even dimmer in contrast with that flash of light. As he peered around with bleary eyes, he noticed that the sky was smattered with the indigo hues of twilight and that tiny stars twinkled in its midst.

“Hey...are you okay?” Ryouji called out shakily.

“I was sure I was going to go deaf...”

“Same. I dunno how the heck my eyes and ears are still intact!”

Misato couldn't help but burst into laughter as Ryouji tapped his fingers all over his face in a panic, checking that everything was as it should be.

“Look,” Misato said with a smile, pointing casually up at the starry heavens. “It blew a hole in the nawame.”

“Whoa! No way. And—damn. It's already nighttime?”

They were reminded once again that time flowed differently beyond the rift.

Trading small chuckles of disbelief, they glanced down to inspect the burnt target of the strike. Effigy and homunculi alike had been reduced to pitch-black, charred remains. Above them, the misty, white dimness of the realm snuck back across the patch of sky, blanketing them in a thick covering of cloud once more.

“Well, that sure did it,” Ryouji remarked, looking at the pile of ash. “Anyway, I can't believe you're *actually* descended from a dragon god. The hell?”

“To be honest, that was my first time seeing them, too... Usually the incantation is only about a tenth as powerful as that.” Their dual attack hadn't come together as simply one plus one; rather, combining their power seemed to have *multiplied* it several times over.

With slow, unsteady steps, Misato and Ryouji approached the incinerated remains, staring down at them cautiously. In fact, the whole area in about a ten-foot radius around them had been burned black. Even more surprising, however, was that even after all that, scraps of scorched straw still lay at its center. Although not a true god, the amalgamation of fear had drawn tremendous strength from its couple hundred years of worship.

Ryouji poked at the remaining burnt straw with the tip of his khakkhara. It didn't show any sign of belching out more strange creatures. Just in case, he whipped his sunglasses off and did a final check of their surroundings.

“What's the verdict?” Misato asked.

“Hmmm...” Ryouji deliberated, scratching his head. “I don't see anythin' like a core body or vessel anymore...but it's still ingrained in the soil and all that. It's gonna be a real pain to clean it up completely.” He wrinkled his nose and crossed his arms in displeasure.

“Oh, right. About that—”

“I can do it,” a voice suddenly volunteered nearby. The pair turned with a start. It was Tsujimoto. “Now that yeh destroyed the core, I can do something about those last scraps. Yeh both deserve a *long* rest. That last part was... Whew, it was something else. Are yeh unharmed? It looked dangerous to be standing quite that close.” His eyebrows were high on his forehead in astonishment.

They both nodded, to which Tsujimoto responded with an apologetic smile.

“All right. Now, Miyazawa... Sorry to rush yeh, but I’ll take over here, so could yeh see to Katsuki in the shrine? I felt a li’l awkward checking in on him myself.” For once, the ever-composed Tsujimoto genuinely seemed to be at a loss.

Misato tilted his head in confused curiosity, yet soon replied, “Will do.” Thus, he parted from Ryouji and headed for the small structure of Kagura Shrine.

Chapter 15: Shooting Star

A small shrine stood in front of a large iwakura rock that graced the side of the mountain. Its name was Kagura Shrine, and it was a plain structure dedicated to the purpose of worshipping the peak itself. A figure of Kannon—a goddess of compassion—was carved into the iwakura behind.

In the modern era, shrines and temples were regarded as exclusively Shintoist and Buddhist respectively, yet until the Edo period, both gods and Buddhas were worshipped at the same monuments. Kagura Shrine persisted as the very soul of the mountain, its form unchanged over hundreds of years.

Kirino had returned to the shrine after fleeing from Misato and the Sugiharas, and just before four o'clock earlier that afternoon, Misato had found his way there and ended up in a feigned standoff with her. Afterward, he left Katsuki to help Kirino pass on, and not far away, he initiated his attack on the adzuki bean weevils of Yasaka Shrine.

Misato lingered in front of diminutive Kagura Shrine. It looked so cramped that he imagined only a single child could fit inside the place. He scanned his surroundings, but Kirino's aura was gone. Tsujimoto had probably given her the perfect purification ritual. Yet talismans encircling the building still upheld a barrier, and the shrine door was closed.

He noticed a pair of loafers lined up in front of the tiny door. They were Katsuki's.

I wonder why Tsujimoto felt too awkward to check on him...?

Misato hesitated in front of the shrine, wondering if he'd been too harsh in electing Katsuki to send Kirino off. Misato had made the decision based on what *he* would do if he were in Katsuki's situation, and his choice might not have been what Katsuki wanted. If that was the case, Misato wasn't sure how he should approach his brother. Chewing on his lip nervously, he put his fingers on the door. *Should I apologize? Comfort him? Give him a pep talk?*

It was only then that he realized Shiota still hadn't come

back.

Is Shiota in there, too? It's kinda weird that he didn't react even after all that thunder and lightning... Hmmm...

He couldn't just anxiously stand in front of the shrine all day. Giving up on rehearsing his responses to a variety of different possibilities, he simply opened the door.

"Katsuki...?" He ducked his head inside the small opening to see a room so spacious it could not have possibly fit inside the shrine's exterior. It must've been about 140 square feet. Although various objects littered the wooden flooring, the hollow space had no furniture. The entrance was only about three feet tall, and the raised floor began right by his knees. He instinctively leaned over and caught sight of a boy kneeling on the floorboards.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dim lighting. When he could discern color once more, he saw naturally brown, fluffy hair—relatively rare for a Japanese person—and a navy blue blazer. It was his younger brother, Katsuki, who kneeled close to the front of the building with his head bowed.

A flash of pearly white caught Misato's eye as a familiar, miniature face poked out from Katsuki's hands folded in his lap. A crimson tongue flittered out as if ascertaining Misato's scent.

Y'know, I sent Shiota as a messenger without really thinking about it, and...yeah, this could've gone badly. If Katsuki hated snakes, we'd have been sent straight to plan B.

But he didn't remember Katsuki ever hating snakes. If anything, Katsuki was a curious, mischievous kid who didn't mind playing with snakes or frogs or bugs. He liked to watch nature programs on TV and had always been interested in what could be found in the southern hemisphere or space. People used to comment that the brothers were polar opposites, considering how Misato was more the indoors sort who could abide studying in a stuffy classroom.

He'd conveyed the message via Shiota solely because it would be less effort than creating a shikigami that could talk. Plus, if snake and boy could understand each other's thoughts through touch, Katsuki could avoid Kirino gleaning any upsetting information that might pass between the two.

Slightly baffled by his unmoving little brother, Misato crawled into the shrine headfirst. Shiota, in his tiny form, swayed his head from side to side as if to greet Misato but, for some reason, didn't

slither back to his owner. Unnerved by the delicate tension in the air, Misato shuffled over and kneeled directly facing Katsuki. The ceiling was high enough that there was no danger of them bumping their heads while seated.

Embarrassed to let the silence fester any longer, Misato was first to speak. "Thank you for sending Kirino off properly, Katsuki. Sorry that I didn't send the most obvious messenger, but I'm glad you could work it out."

Cold sweat beaded on his temple. In Misato's memory, Katsuki had always been the type to say five or ten words in the time it took Misato to say one, so it was a little unsettling that he was so utterly silent.

Maybe this means he's finally over his adolescent phase...? The Katsuki of his memories was as he last saw his brother: a boy in his first year of middle school. He remembered Katsuki's voice was just beginning to break at the time.

Misato watched him, emotion surging in his chest as he recalled their younger days.

All of a sudden, Katsuki's hands switched where they held Shiota. "...Misato."

"Y-Yes?" Misato jumped in response to Katsuki's low, grave voice, then straightened his back. Shiota undulated in front of him, puzzled.

"Is this snake...*part* of you?"

Urk. Misato immediately stiffened. In all honesty, he'd completely forgotten that fact of late; he'd just been treating Shiota like a pet. Yes—the white serpent was the creature Misato had consumed. He could sum up the story of how he was forced to ingest it, had wanted so badly to live that he'd eaten a monster, and became something neither human nor spirit as a result in one word: shameful.

I've messed up, he lamented to himself deep within his heart.

"...Yeah. I guess so," Misato answered uncertainly.

Thus far, Shiota had not harmed other people. In his present life, everyone who knew about Shiota simply accepted that Misato Miyazawa occupied his own plane of existence, treating the snake spirit like a kind of messenger god. But his new self wasn't something he wanted to reveal to those who knew the *old* Misato—anyone who knew Misato Narukami. He didn't want to show Katsuki the aberration he'd become.

“Sorry,” Misato apologized quietly.

Katsuki’s shoulders tensed. His fingers tightened around Shiota, prompting the snake to writhe and wriggle out of his grip. In the miniscule spirit’s absence, Katsuki’s knuckles instead paled around the hem of his blazer as his head drooped even further forward, and a strained voice escaped his throat. “Why’re you apologizing?! Why?!” Teardrops plopped onto his whitened, trembling hands. Sobs heaved desperately from his throat as though his body could barely contain them, his shaky, loud breaths echoing in the empty room.

Misato froze, entirely at a loss in the face of his brother’s compulsive fit of crying.

“Katsuki’s crying. Misato sad. Shiota sad. Katsuki’s fault.” Shiota, who’d wound his way back to Misato, was trying to tell him something. The snake was clearly shaken by Katsuki’s bawling and blubbing but nonetheless seemed reluctant to leave the boy alone. Misato and the serpent were connected on a profound, fundamental level. In other words, the snake’s like or dislike of someone often reflected Misato’s own feelings toward the person. And of course Misato couldn’t bear to see Katsuki cry.

What do you mean, “Katsuki’s fault”? Are you saying he thinks me eating yo— I mean, me eating a parasitic snake is his fault?

“Katsuki sad. Can’t go home. Too sad.”

Realizing that Shiota’s words were too fragmentary to disclose any real meaning, Misato took a deep breath. He felt he didn’t have the right to start playing the older brother after so much time apart, yet saying nothing wasn’t going to help either of them understand the circumstances.

“Why, huh...?” Misato began. “Well... I’m sure you’ve heard all sorts of things, but really, I’m just sorry to show you myself in this state. Otherwise, as I’m sure you can see, I’m getting by pretty well. So you should get back to your life, too, and—”

“It’s not your fault, Misato! None of it’s your fault! That’s why it’s so unfair that...that...” Katsuki’s own sobs interrupted him.

Unable to watch his brother weep, Misato hurriedly bundled Katsuki into his arms. He thought Katsuki had grown up—but inside, Katsuki was still the same hot-tempered crybaby he always was. “Shh, you’re okay. There,” Misato reassured him.

Overwhelmed by his brother’s comforting arms and words, Katsuki clung to Misato and squeezed. “If only...if only I hadn’t

stopped you back then... You would've been free, and... I could've just waved you goodbye, and... I was so..." He was a tearful wreck, sobbing apology after apology, none of which really made any sense.

Misato's eyebrows drew together in total befuddlement as he stared up at the ceiling. *I have no idea what he's talking about.*

"Hey, just...wait until you've calmed down, okay? I don't know what time you're referring to, but you're absolutely not at fault for anything that happened with that curse, I promise you. There was never any doubt about who would inherit the clan, after all."

The one who'd assailed Misato with the parasitic snake had been desperate to become the next head's aide. Katsuki probably would have chosen Misato for the position, however, had all transpired as initially planned, and apparently the attacker wasn't too keen on that idea. As a result, both Misato and the person in question suffered the loss of their status in the family, leaving no one but Wakatake to attend to Katsuki. Therefore, Katsuki was also a victim of that power struggle in a way.

Misato tried telling him as much, and Katsuki merely shook his head even harder, yelling, "No! No!"

It was difficult to believe he'd already turned eighteen.

"Way before that...!" he hiccupped. "When you tried to run away...and find your mom...I...I..." His shoulders quaked as tears soaked Misato's jacket. "I *knew*...that you were gonna...get on the bus alone. Your bag, how late it was, the one-way ticket... I *knew*. But I was so scared, and...and...I hated the thought of you leaving me all alone, so..."

So he threw a tantrum about wanting to see the meteor shower together. So that I wouldn't leave without saying a word. Terrified that Misato would abandon him, he'd tugged on Misato's sleeve just as Misato was about to cast aside the Narukamis and pursue his missing mother.

"If...if only I hadn't stopped you..." Katsuki mourned, his voice hoarse and exhausted from crying. "You wouldn't have been changed forever..."

"Ah..." Misato said softly, stroking Katsuki's fluffy hair, the boy's face buried in Misato's shoulder. "You realized, huh?"

Misato had tired of much about his life at that time. Honestly, he'd seen his flight as no more than a vacation. He'd packed his

overnight bag with a change of clothes and his valuables, then checked the bus and train timetables. His main goal was to get as far away as possible. He dreamed of escaping the narrow, stuffy, unbelievably irrational world of the Narukamis—and his tiny little brother noticed. The young boy had even taken matters into his own hands.

“Did you want to come with me?” He held Katsuki in a tight hug, his whispery voice so tender that it almost embarrassed him. He couldn’t help but smile slightly at the fact that he was cradling his brother like a small child the same way he had all those years before.

Katsuki remained silent for a few beats before nodding, his nose still pressed to Misato’s shoulder.

“You’re too cute,” Misato sighed, ruffling Katsuki’s hair. In the end, Misato wasn’t the only one who’d wanted to run away that summer’s night. Hand in hand, the brothers had willingly become a pair of fugitives.

“But there’s one thing you got wrong, Katsuki,” Misato pointed out. “Back then, all I wanted was to escape from reality. I didn’t have anywhere in mind; I just wanted to leave. If you hadn’t stopped me...” He paused for a moment. “I’m...I’m sure I would’ve left the world of the living behind altogether.”

What had prevented him from doing so was clutching him that very second: his sobbing brother’s hands. He’d genuinely started to hate everything and often daydreamed of returning to eternity...and Katsuki had stopped him.

He remembered the words that had sent him back: “It’s dark. I’m scared, Misato...” Incapable of leaving his wailing brother behind or forcibly dragging Katsuki along, Misato had aborted his getaway attempt and phoned home. The warmth of the bossy, naive boy who trusted Misato far too much was the one thing that kept him grounded—the one thing that tethered him to the world of the living.

When they arrived home, the incident was treated as yet another case of Katsuki being too demanding. There were very few people who suspected Misato the way Wakatake did.

“So *please*, don’t think it’s your fault. There’s no reason for you to blame yourself like this. The burden isn’t yours to bear.” Nothing good would ever have come out of Katsuki’s “if only” scenario. Misato could say that with confidence.

"In fact, it's thanks to you that I was able to keep living. That's why, when I consumed that curse, I decided I wanted to survive even if I was apart from you," Misato assured him. "And the reason I managed to keep clinging to life until I regained that desire...was because you stopped me that night. I'm not ever going back to the Narukamis, so we can't live side by side again, but...you definitely shouldn't blame yourself for that.

"Choose what *you* want to do with your life. Take the path that genuinely calls to you. Would you do that for me?" he implored. Misato didn't want Katsuki to plan his life around his guilt or other people or a past he could never reclaim. It had to be for his current and future self.

"Come on," Misato said, patting the back of Katsuki's blazer. He rose to his knees, Katsuki still in his arms, and so he squeezed through the shrine door and pulled Katsuki out. Misato's mind reeled as he looked between his brother and the shrine exterior; it truly didn't look like Katsuki could have fitted in there, never mind the *two* of them.

Out in the open, Misato could finally see the scratches on Katsuki's tear-swollen face as well as his battered uniform. Both were most likely the work of a certain hooligan. Katsuki hung his head as though to hide his reddened eyes while Misato maintained a comforting arm around his shoulders. Tsujimoto and Ryouji were staring at them from a distance.

"Let's get you off this mountain, Katsuki. Then you're going home. Go home and focus on yourself while you decide what you want to do. If you like stars, why not study astronomy? Or if you like animals, why not biology? You could even study a foreign language if you want to travel. Besides, if the college entrance exams are too hard right now, you can always take them again next year," Misato reasoned optimistically. And if Katsuki was too ashamed to wait another year, then he could just study abroad instead. Given the funds the clan possessed, Misato was sure they could sort something out for him.

Meanwhile, Katsuki was tilting his head, an expression of bewilderment on his face at the prospect of so many opportunities. "But Misato..." he said doubtfully. "No one back home will let me do that."

"The only seal of approval you need is Father's. Who cares what anyone else thinks?" Misato harrumphed, walking forward

while helping to support Katsuki's weight.

Taking that as their sign, Ryouji jingled his khakkhara to indicate the way to the rift where Ookubo stood guard. On the other side of a gently inclined cluster of trees, the *ding, ding* of a bell answered, and Ryouji turned back to silently nod at the rest of the party.

"Come on," Misato encouraged as he assisted Katsuki down the slope.

The scenery around them changed in the blink of an eye, the back of the shrine at the foot of the mountain coming into view. A bell dangled by the rear entrance, and the interior was flooded with a brilliant light.

"I know it's difficult to talk to Father with how busy he is, but I think I know what he really wants for you." Misato contemplated their history, gazing at the ground. "He wants to set you free."

"What?" questioned Katsuki instantly, taken aback.

"Our family's like a company now, you know. 'Narukami Consultants,' or whatever it was. I get the feeling that Dad wants to change the way things are. Rather than a clan whose leadership's passed down from parent to child, it would be a company with someone talented and motivated at its head—someone who *wants* to be there," Misato theorized. "I'm sure things won't change right away, and the matter of retaining enough Narukami blood to pass down the secret arts will be tough to get around, but...at the very least, the clan members won't end up on the streets if you do choose to throw it all away. The clan could still survive as an organization completely unrelated to the Narukami line. Before he got called back to the clan, Dad chose his own studies and was working a job he actually liked, you know? He wouldn't want to force you to throw all that away as well. That's how I see it, anyway."

Exiting the mountain's Other Side, they passed through the rift. Misato nodded to Ookubo and Yoshida as he entered the shrine with Katsuki in tow, then led his brother out the opposite door. The sun had long set, and the chilly bite in the air was a stark contrast to the lukewarm temperature of the spirit realm. Shivering and shaking, Misato drew Katsuki even closer as he glanced up at the night sky. Snow had been forecast, but there wasn't a cloud in sight. The sky was canvas to a clear, wintry display of glittering stars.

"...I don't believe that," Katsuki murmured, his head hanging

low.

Neither of Katsuki's parents had a penchant for communicating. Ostensibly they had struggled to build a relationship with their adolescent son while so swamped with work.

"I'll talk to him, okay?" Misato offered with an awkward smile.

"But..." protested Katsuki quietly, studying his shoes. His tone was weak, frightened somehow.

"What is it?"

"Misato, um... Are you sure that's okay? You don't want to be in contact with the clan anymore, right? If you get involved in my problems, then...what if something happens *again* because of me?" His voice quavered somewhat, still a little thick from crying.

Misato looked up at the starry sky, soothingly rubbing Katsuki's back as he spoke. "Don't say that. If you'll let me, I'd love to keep being your brother. And that's what I *want*. There's no way something I'm doing for myself could ever be your fault, you know?" He smiled again. "By the way...is the Winter Triangle visible right now?" He used a knuckle to tilt Katsuki's chin toward the heavens.

"...No. Seriously, you never could get those constellations right..." Katsuki grumbled, a wrinkle forming between his eyebrows.

"Well, *I* don't know how you can possibly remember them," Misato chuckled. "Anyway...do you not like snakes?"

"Mm, they're okay."

"Is my little Shirota 'okay' as well, then?" Misato asked. He produced the white serpent from his breast pocket.

Katsuki leaned in to inspect it closely, his eyes locking with the small creature's. "...He's quite cute. It's funny the way you treat him, though. Like calling him 'little' Shirota... And he refers to himself in the third person, you know. He's like a baby." Katsuki lightly prodded the snake's snout, and its tongue flitted out in response.

"Oh, uh, well... I guess I do treat him like a bit of a baby," Misato admitted. He'd never really thought that deeply about how he referred to the snake, nor how the spirit interpreted it—much to Ryouji's dismay.

"It's bad enough that he's got the same name as a lactobacillus," Ryouji had said—just that morning, in fact. "But at this rate it's not gonna be long 'til he starts callin' *himself* 'little

Shirota.”

Misato pouted. It seemed as though he really was the only person that didn't have an issue with the serpent's moniker. "Ryouji complains a lot about how the name doesn't suit him, too..." Misato mumbled. "I'm starting to think it might be tacky after all."

Abruptly, Katsuki tore out from under Misato's arm. His cheeks puffed out as he slammed his palms down on Misato's shoulders.

Misato blinked. What had gotten into him?

"Don't listen to anything that guy says! Who cares about his opinion?!" Katsuki said vehemently, evidently enraged by the mention of Ryouji's name.

Misato continued to blink in a daze. He recalled Ryouji saying, "The li'l guy hates me," but hadn't quite imagined the reaction would be so visceral. "Don't you like Ryouji, Katsuki?"

"I hate him! I hate him so, so, so much! You shouldn't let vulgar men like that anywhere near you! He's a bad influence!"

Well. That certainly told him.

Several shouts of laughter resounded from behind at Katsuki's loud, somewhat immature objection.

Misato looked back up at the wintry night sky and whispered to the tiny snake in his breast pocket. "Did you hear that, Shirota? He called you cute."

With a frustrated *humph*, Katsuki stalked away from Misato and toward the group that had so incited him.

"*Yeah*," Shirota responded happily. Misato chuckled once more.

Then, to his surprise, a shooting star inked a glowing streak across the firmament, and he was reminded of how beautiful meteor showers were in the summer months. Misato didn't know the first thing about stars, but even so, the comet's beauty captivated him so intensely that his mind went momentarily blank.

"Katsuki!" Misato called out, struck by a sudden idea. "We should go see a meteor shower again soon!"

A huge smile stretched across Katsuki's face as his bright tone colored the air: "Yeah!"

Epilogue: Monday Night Toast

IT was December 25, the day of Jesus Christ's birth. Naturally, the date was special to Christians, but for the majority of Japanese people, it was regarded more like the day *after* the festivities: in Japan, the biggest end-of-year event had to be Christmas Eve. That year, Christmas Eve was on a Sunday while Christmas Day fell victim to the working week, so the holiday spirit was whipped right out from under people's feet.

The same went for Misato that evening, who'd just arrived back home and taken off his suit jacket and necktie. For once, he was busying about the kitchen of the Karino estate's main house. Two saucepans simmered on the gas stove rings. Misato stood in front of them—still dressed in his work slacks, knitted vest, and button-up shirt, and an added padded kimono for comfort—humming in concentration as he stared at the recipe on his phone screen.

He gasped with the sudden realization that he'd been spacing out, then hurriedly peered into one of the pots. *Got there just in time. Phew.* With a sigh of relief, he dialed the flame down to a weaker heat.

“So, I need a wooden spoon... Where's the wooden spoon...? We've got a potato masher...and a rubber spatula...”

It was tough cooking in someone else's kitchen. After rummaging through several drawers, he finally located the desired spoon. It was obvious that not all the utensils had been acquired by Ryouji. The kitchen displayed all too clearly the remains of a family lost; all sorts of cooking implements, worn through years of consistent usage, lined the cabinets and drawers. Misato was sure Ryouji hadn't used them that much himself, which meant they were some of the relics that had been previously tucked away in the storeroom.

Apparently, after Ryouji's grandparents passed on, Ryouji's adoptive father purchased the vacant house from a distant relative of the Karinos who'd come into possession of the property—along

with the items they'd left behind. One could easily figure out that he bought the place solely to bequeath it to Ryouji.

Either way, I'll be in trouble if this thing burns. He turned off the heat for one of the saucepans and checked to make sure the contents were cooked all the way through before pouring some of the extra water out.

"All right," Misato said, nodding to himself. He picked up the wooden spoon and used it to mash the potato cubes that sat steaming in the pot. "Oh, crap—I was supposed to boil them in salty water, wasn't I...? Oh well. Maybe I can just add some seasoning right now..." As he crushed the potatoes, he continued to mutter to himself in a way that would probably alarm any eavesdropper who was slated to eat the dish.

Next, he was to put the potatoes back on a low heat and add a splash of water. They were supposed to thicken, so he set his eye firmly on the pot, stirring nervously to prevent them from burning...and the pan on the other coil suddenly began to foam.

"Whoa! Why would a boiled egg be making all that—... Oh, *no!* It's broken!" He switched off the heat in a panic but ultimately just left the pot there for the moment since he couldn't actually do anything to save it.

Somehow, the potatoes looked like they were coming along nicely, so he deposited the exploded boiled egg under cold running water and squeezed some rounds of salted cucumber to get the excess moisture out. The cucumber was sliced perfectly thin, for which Misato had the wonders of modern technology to thank: he'd used a slicer.

"Okay, next... We've got some apple...and some fish sausages, right? Hmm, where's the mayonnaise...? Maybe I need salt and pepper, too..."

He was attempting to make potato salad. It was a special occasion because—for some reason—Ryouji and Misato were going to share Christmas dinner together. Just the two of them. As a Shugendo monk and an onmyoji. *The plot thickens*, Misato thought with a smirk.

Of course, Ryouji was the one to suggest it, and he was in charge of setup. And rather than hang out in Ryouji's den like usual, they would eat in the parlor. They'd never used the room before but had decided to convert it into a new common area for the both of them to use.

Luckily, it seemed as though someone in the past had also utilized it as such, so a coaxial cable already fed into the room, just waiting to be connected. They were planning to lug in the big TV from Ryouji's room, spread a rug over the tatami mats, and place a coffee table in the center along with some floor cushions. Ryouji had been excitedly moving things around and clearing space all day.

Misato had asked what Ryouji was going to do without a TV in his room, and evidently Ryouji subscribed to several online streaming services, so its absence didn't really bother him.

Meanwhile, Misato whirled from one concern to the next as he tried to cook. *Maybe I should've mixed the mayo in while the potatoes were still hot...*

He was doing his best to recreate from very old, faint memory the potato salad his mother used to make. Aside from that, the menu consisted of fried chicken from a famed fast food restaurant that had been on sale at the supermarket the day before, some discounted Christmas hors d'oeuvres from the deli corner, and a Christmas cake that was half off every year at a certain grocery store known for low prices. They thought it would be a good idea to include some kind of side dish, which eventually led to Misato's suggestion.

"Potato salad, huh?" Ryouji had said. "Never tried it before."

"I don't really like the ones you can buy at the store, so it's been a while for me, too," Misato recalled. "The recipe's too different. Like, fried oysters and potato salad are definitely best when they're home-cooked."

"Mmmm, potato salad... I wanna try it." Ryouji grinned. "Curry, hamburger steaks, fried chicken, potato salad... It's startin' to sound like a feast somebody's mom would cook up! Mmmm..."

The thuglike landlord had begun languidly talking about how he craved the taste of a family meal so badly... And Misato, swept up in his longing, had offered to prepare a potato salad, since he used to help his mother make it back in the day. Incidentally, the last time he'd done so was in his first year of middle school—not to mention that he'd never actually made it *alone* before.

Until his mother disappeared, Misato had lived with her in one of the outbuildings on the Narukami estate. That space was much more well equipped than the one he currently resided in, with a kitchen, toilet, and bath. It was also easy to access from the estate's

back entrance. Akemi, Misato's mother, had enjoyed relative freedom. Then Katsuki started visiting their little home on a frequent basis and calling her "Mama Akemi."

"Put the apple in salt water... I was never really too keen on the apple, but I guess I should still include it..."

He scraped the mashed potatoes into a bowl and blended in the mayonnaise and other ingredients: fish sausage cut into semi-circles, salted cucumber, chunks of peeled apple, and what was supposed to be cubes of boiled egg. Because some of the white had spilled into the pot, he couldn't peel the shell off as normal. As a result, it was only half-cooked.

"...Oh well," he sighed, defeated. "It'll all be the same once I've mixed it."

It was almost seven o'clock. The rumble of an engine sounded in the distance—Ryouji had returned from picking up some alcohol and snacks after finishing the arrangement of their mini banquet hall.

"Oooh, it's ready!" hollered Ryouji as the door slid open. A rush of cold air accompanied his arrival, streaming past his feet. The dirt-floored pit outside the kitchen door adjoined the entrance. Originally, the kitchen was built directly on the pit, and though it had since been raised onto floorboards, the height differed by only a couple of inches, so the room rapidly grew chilly.

Ryouji was clutching two large shopping bags in either hand as he peeked into the kitchen, his spirits high. He unloaded the alcohol into the fridge, then took some of the prepackaged food out and started to heat it up.

"Do we have enough tableware?" Ryouji asked in a doubtful tone.

"Should I bring some over from my room?"

"Oh, nah—I can do that for ya." He vanished from the kitchen once more, humming a little tune that grew fainter as he walked away.

Since resolving the Mount Kagura affair and accepting his payment from the Narukamis, *plus* receiving a thank-you letter and a cash reward from the town hall, Misato's thuggish housemate had been in a very good mood. He'd even offered to waive the rent that Misato had fallen behind on due to buying winter tires, so he seemed to be very satisfied with his current financial state. The Narukamis must've paid him a fair sum, and he'd earned it, after

all. In Misato's mind, Ryouji was unquestionably the MVP in that case.

"Hmmm... There's something missing," Misato mumbled when he sampled the potato salad. He pulled out his phone again to skim through a bunch of different recipe sites and confirm which ingredients they shared and which were unique. "Maybe it's salt and pepper, then. No—or maybe sugar...?"

He shook some salt and pepper into the mix and tried a mouthful but cringed at the intense taste. After another few moments of hesitation, he gingerly added a little sugar. A bit of the salad had gotten on the back of his hand, and he brought it to his mouth to taste the mixture again.

"Oh. This is it." A smile rose to Misato's cheeks as the yet slightly warm potato melted on his tongue. It was the flavor he remembered from his childhood.

The microwave pinged with a *beep, beep*, telling him that the chicken was done. Next they had to heat the fried hors d'oeuvres. Ryouji arrived with the extra tableware, and he transferred the fried chicken to a large plate.

"The potato salad's done," Misato informed him.

"Nice. Wanna help me get all this stuff on plates?"

They divided the labor of placing the food, snacks, and drinks into the appropriate receptacles and carrying them out of the kitchen. It was much easier to get to the parlor by crossing the pit than by passing through Ryouji's messy room with its lack of visible floor. The pair wiggled their feet into some slippers to walk across the earthen pit, then stepped up into their new conjoined living room. A fan heater whirled away, a substitute for the comfortable warmth that a kotatsu would have provided.

"Wow, Ryouji! It looks amazing!" marveled Misato as he entered. "In fact, those things are dangerous. We might never want to leave the room again." He laughed as he pointed out some huge cushions that had caught his eye.

"Hehehe," Ryouji chuckled proudly. "They were sellin' 'em cheap at the hardware store."

Two colossal bean bags were enshrined on the rug in the middle of the hundred-square-foot room. That they'd been using the shabby space to store their laundry just made the transformation seem all the more drastic.

They arrayed the plates on the large coffee table and soon

poured themselves a couple of beers, clinking their glasses together.

“Are we gonna make a toast? What to?” Misato asked.

“Uh, like... To seein’ a dangerous case through, or somethin’.”

Misato grinned. “Sounds good to me. You did a lot for us, Ryouji. Thank you so much!”

“You’re damn welcome. Aight, I’ll drink to that,” Ryouji snickered in reply. They lightly touched their glasses together once more, then downed a few heavy gulps of the bubbling liquid.

Ryouji had bought quite the stash of alcohol. Fortunately, Misato was taking paid vacation time the following day, and Ryouji would be working the late shift. It was the perfect opportunity to finally settle who could handle their liquor best.

While Misato was tucking into the roast beef hors d’oeuvres, Ryouji immediately moved to try the potato salad.

“How is it?” Misato asked.

“Real nice! I like it a lot.”

“That’s good,” Misato said with a smile. When it came to cooking, Ryouji was a cut above him. The ability to prepare potato salad didn’t make Misato a good cook. And even though he’d been a little too slapdash with the seasoning, it tasted good simply because it was freshly made. The same logic applied to quite a few dishes.

“I guess we probably shouldn’t say ‘Merry Christmas,’ huh?” Misato commented with a smirk as he selected a chicken leg decorated with Christmas-colored ribbon.

“Ya got that right,” Ryouji agreed with a cackle. “It’s not like I believe it’s betrayin’ my religion or anythin’, though. Still...in that case, let’s just raise a glass to chance meetings.” He grinned, pushing his sunglasses up.

He didn’t specify which chance meeting he was referring to. Of course, he could mean the pair themselves, yet the long series of strange coincidences throughout the Mount Kagura investigation had allowed it to conclude in a manner almost too good to be true as well.

“To chance meetings,” Misato echoed, smiling back at Ryouji as he raised his half-empty glass.

They turned on the widescreen TV in front of them and gnawed on their chicken while watching some kind of nature program. They drank one glass after another, talking about anything and everything whenever there was a lull in the show. Once all the beer cans were emptied, they made highballs by

mixing cheap whiskey with carbonated beverages. It was a good thing Misato had a trained bartender right next to him.

"Sooo... Have you heard anythin' from the Narukamis since seein' Katsuki off?" Ryouji asked as he fished pieces of apple out of the potato salad and happily munched on them.

"Stop cherry-picking," Misato reprimanded with a slap of his hand before answering, "Yup—I gave my number to Katsuki, so he let me know what happened. He said he threw his phone away before entering the nawame, you know, so we couldn't properly exchange our info right then and there, but it worked out. Apparently, he managed to have a good talk with our dad. Oh—and Wakatake got demoted, by the way. Katsuki's not sure if he'll be getting a new chaperone-slash-liaison though."

"Liaison? Between Katsuki and the clan, ya mean?"

"Exactly. He says he wants to try leaving home and living by himself for college. I think it would be good for him, so I'm glad he took my advice."

One developed a lot of life skills when living alone for the first time and budgeting everything oneself. If Katsuki did one day head the organization, working a part-time job would be a valuable experience for him, too. Misato had insisted that even if he got into the nearby university back home, he should still move out just to experience that self-dependence.

The fan heater spun at full speed, generating a low rumble in the background. The parlor was bordered by a wood-framed glass door; a sliding, painted *fusuma* screen; and paper sliding doors. Strips of intricate fretwork decorated the sections of wall above the doors, allowing for cross-ventilation through the house. Despite the circulating air, Misato had warmed up considerably from the food and alcohol, so he slipped off the padded kimono he'd layered over his button-up shirt and sweater vest.

"Whoa. That spoiled brat livin' all alone? Pfft. Still, I'm sure he'll be all right if he's close to home," Ryouji sniggered, his highball sloshing precariously in one hand.

"I get that Katsuki has a grudge against you, but...do you have a problem with him, too? Don't you think you're being a little too mean?" Misato narrowed his eyes in response to the scathing remark about his adorable little brother. He glared at Ryouji.

With an even more wicked smile, the man downed the remainder of his highball. "Nah, nah—of course not. Problems?"

Never heard of 'em."

"If you say so..." Misato replied dubiously. "He'll probably start visiting every so often next year, after all. If he passes his exams, that is."

The probability of him passing was high. It wasn't exactly Misato's place to boast about his little brother considering he hadn't been there for him the past five years, but Katsuki's ability to adapt to sudden change was awe-inspiring—as was his quick cognition and memory. He was physically stronger than Misato, too, and likely had yet more potential to improve. If Katsuki put his mind to it—even on short notice—he could probably score well enough to get into the highly ranked college he was aiming for.

"...Say what?" That time, Ryouji was the one to narrow his eyes.

"Like I *said*, he wants to try for the national university here in Hiroshima."

There was only one national university in Hiroshima Prefecture, and it was about an hour and a half away from the Karino estate by car. It was much closer to Tomoe than to Izumo.

"You're kiddin'! He's comin' to Hiroshima?! Keh. Got some nerve, that kid," Ryouji grouched, flumping backward into his bean bag.

Misato's eyebrows knitted together, and he reiterated his point: "So, why do you hate him so much? I get that he's a bit quick-tempered and high-energy, but he's an honest kid. Smart, too—and kind. He's got a kind of drive, y'know? Plus, he's small and cute, and his hair's really fluffy, and he's earnest and sincere—"

"All right, all right! I get it already, okay? Of course that's what he seems like to *you*, you damn drunk of a big bro," Ryouji interrupted with a *tch*, irritation clear in his voice.

Misato slammed his glass down on the table. He lurched to his knees and grabbed Ryouji by the collar, hauling him up from where he'd sunk down into the bean bag. "Listen here, you oaf. My brother is—"

"Calm down, Misato! Hey—your eyes are all unfocused!"

"I *am* calm."

"No chance in hell! C'mon, how 'bout we have another glass? I'll start over," Ryouji said, skillfully wriggling out of Misato's grip and picking up the bottle of cold sake. He poured some over the remaining ice in their glasses, then nudged Misato's toward him.

Sighing, Misato accepted it and gulped the contents down.

“Aight, I’ll admit that your bro grew up pretty well considerin’ the circumstances. On that note, how’d he even get so spoiled? Was it all you? He’s not even ashamed of it either. He kicks and screams to get his way and doesn’t give a damn.”

Misato winced but answered nonetheless. “Mom and I were usually the ones who kept him company, so I guess she had a hand in it, too. Actually, no—what’s wrong with a good kid being a bit spoiled, anyway?!”

“Then how’d he turn out so different from you?” Ryouji muttered.

“You’ve got a point,” Misato hummed. “If I had to say, it’s probably because I wasn’t all that cute. I get that Katsuki seems spoiled, but he doesn’t overly rely on others and—well, he’s cute. I know that if he just had the right support and someone who treated him as an equal, he could definitely turn the Narukami clan into something great!”

Even after Misato’s attempt at persuasion, Ryouji slouched back into the bean bag with an annoyed pout on his lips.

“You’re a really tough nut to crack,” Misato sighed in defeat.

“Heh. You know me,” Ryouji replied with a fed-up half-smile. “Welp, if you’re all right with it, then it ain’t my business. But...if you were always havin’ to pamper the kid, didn’t you ever have someone to pamper *you*? I guess your days of makin’ potato salad with your mom were over after she...y’know,” Ryouji murmured, averting his eyes.

His awkward tone suddenly made something click for Misato. *Oh, right—didn’t I ever tell him?*

“My mom’s actually alive,” he clarified. “I don’t know where she is, but my dad does. Technically, I was raised by a single mother, but Mom always told me that Dad couldn’t be there because he had something important to do—and that was enough to keep me happy.”

“What happened?” Ryouji asked in concern, sitting upright again and refilling his cup of cold sake.

“Well,” Misato began, “Mom didn’t run away because she wanted to. I think someone was targeting her, and...Dad probably told her to hide somewhere the clan members didn’t know about. I never pushed him about where she went, nor have I seen her since. When I went to get a copy of my family register a few years back,

my address was still registered as the place I was born, in Hiroshima City. Mom had never removed herself from the register—although I did find out that the space for my father's name had been left blank. But just after I tried to run away with Katsuki and that whole fiasco happened...Dad made sure to let me know she was okay."

The head of the Narukami clan wasn't the sort of man to tell lies. If he said she was safe, he likely knew it for a fact.

"Right," Ryouji said, his curiosity sated as he sipped his sake and munched on some nuts.

"Anyway—enough about me," Misato hinted with a slight laugh as he wedged himself into his bean bag. Ryouji didn't smile back. In fact, he frowned. "You might not be a saint, and you really know how to hold a grudge, but...the fact that I have someone who'll frown like that for my sake means more to me than anything."

All throughout the Mount Kagura case, Ryouji had never treated him like anyone other than Misato Miyazawa—the man he knew personally. And if all of Misato's life events and choices thus far were what had been required to chance across someone like Ryouji, then, well...it was all worth it.

The fact that the pair had met at all was no act of divine destiny or predetermined fate, nor a miracle. They'd simply arrived at the same place at the same time at the end of a long string of happenstance. There was no grand purpose for or hidden meaning in their meeting. All it could be called was a lucky coincidence, a result of every choice ever made in the world.

That was why Ryouji was so precious to Misato. Right from the very bottom of his heart.

"...Y-You *really* come out with the mushiest crap without even battin' an eyelid, huh...?" Ryouji grumbled, his drink-reddened cheeks flushing an even brighter scarlet.

"Hehehe," Misato chortled tipsily, still ensconced in his bean bag. He observed Ryouji blush out of the corner of his eye. The monk readily expressed his warm nature and sincerity through his actions but became a stuttering mess the moment Misato tried to give him a heartfelt word of thanks. And although Misato felt a little guilty admitting it, that was fun to watch.

When Ryouji noticed Misato laughing at him, his eyes suddenly blew wide in irritation. "You asshole!" bellowed Ryouji as

he launched himself at Misato, who hastily leaned forward to avoid his attack under the guise of reaching for a bottle of white wine. People often said it was bad to drink several different types of alcohol in one night, yet Ryouji had purchased a very random assortment of varieties and brands without a second thought.

“Let’s have another glass,” Misato announced, popping open the cheap-looking wine’s golden cap. “We can start over again, right?”

“Tch,” the red-faced drunk complained as Misato filled his glass to the brim.

After refilling his own, Misato crowed, “Okay! Let’s toast to the successful conclusion of the Mount Kagura case and...ummm... Ryouji Karino being awarded by the town hall...and getting an unofficial offer to negotiate a freelancer’s contract with the ADU!”

“Cheers!” they both shouted, raising their glasses to each other.

“Hell yeah to that stable income!” Ryouji whooped. “From next year on, anyway! I can’t believe I won’t have to take on all ’em petty cases for a change!”

Given Ryouji’s performance in their latest case, the Abnormal Disaster Unit was pursuing a way for him to join the team on an as-needed basis for when they needed extra support. They’d concluded that they could legally subcontract him as a freelancer working for Town Hall. Each fiscal year, the unit would prepare a contract in advance to outsource “part of the tackling and prevention of disasters relating to abnormal causes in Tomoe,” then pay Ryouji a fixed sum after some budgeting. In simple terms, Ryouji would aid the Disaster Unit when the office called on him. It was actually Ryouji’s penchant for legalese and drawing up contracts that had made a formal deal possible.

“Try telling the manager that,” Misato laughed dryly. “But still, maybe we’ll get to work together as an actual team next year.”

The thuggish psychic was in the same business as Misato, but they’d never taken a job together. It was to be expected, really, since one of them was self-employed and the other a civil servant.

“I know, right? I’m still just a subcontractor, but...I look forward to workin’ with ya, Mr. Town Hall.” Ryouji grinned, rubbing his hands together excitedly. He’d already finished off his drink.

“You’d better. In fact, you can start getting excited once you

start bringing me results. ...Or something like that,” Misato giggled, adopting his best “toxic manager” voice.

They both burst into a fit of raucous laughter. Despite their sodden state, the pair unabashedly poured themselves yet another round. Neither of them was really sure who’d drunk the most by that point. The table was strewn with empty plates and cans and the remains of the chicken.

Ryouji was still cackling when he fished some more snacks out of a plastic bag and presented them reverently to Misato. “Please, take this. It’s everything I have,” he proclaimed theatrically.

“For a moment you could’ve convinced me it was a bag of gold.”

“Nah, wait, look, look— *Look at the label,*” Ryouji said, pointing at the packet wildly. “It’s gold all right—golden dried squid!”

They erupted into guffaws once more, even though it wasn’t that funny. Rolling over in his fit of laughter, Ryouji slumped back into the bean bag and abruptly offered his fist out to Misato.

“I meant it, though. I *am* lookin’ forward to working with you...*partner.*” Ryouji grinned again, slightly sheepish. Even so, there was definitely a trace of something fond in his smile.

“Yeah. Me too,” Misato agreed, reaching out to bump Ryouji’s fist with his own.

The fan heater started beeping, probably in protest of something like “Why am I still on full blast after three hours?!” Misato got up to press the “Start” button again.

“What should we open next?” he asked.

“I think there’s still another bottle of wine left. Before that though—I gotta take a bathroom break.”

“Have fun,” Misato said, waving him off.

Ryouji stumbled and swayed as he drunkenly tottered across the room. Once he put a hand on the paper sliding door, however, he suddenly stopped. Too tipsy to notice, Misato simply continued to rummage for a bottle they hadn’t opened yet.

“...The way you can immediately verbalize somethin’ the moment you put your finger on it...is a real huge strength of yours,” Ryouji mumbled.

“Huh?” Misato said, glancing up from the scattered jumble of containers. He hadn’t realized Ryouji was still in the room, so he’d only half-heard him. “Did you just say something? Something about

me being strong? I know I can handle my drink, but I dunno..."

Exploding into laughter at Misato's absurd misinterpretation, Ryouji staggered his way down the corridor, doubled over in mirth.

"What was that all about?" Misato muttered to himself, confused as he recommenced his search for more alcohol. Stacks of clean laundry still occupied the corner of the room as usual, folded neatly (Misato's handiwork, of course). In their shadow lay one more bottle of red wine.

"There it is! This must be the last one..." Misato murmured.

A few seconds later, a disappointed smile tugged at his lips as he ceremoniously uncorked the last bottle of wine.

"It doesn't look like we're going to settle this battle today after all, huh?"

Afterword

THANK you so much for purchasing this copy of *Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes: Hide and Seek in the Wintry Mountains*. It was thanks to everyone's unwavering support that I was able to publish a second volume, so I'm extremely happy.

Unlike Volume 1, this book covered just one overarching story. On that note, I'd like to thank my publisher, Kotonoha Bunko, for increasing the number of words per line, number of lines per page, and total number of pages to accommodate the story since the content wouldn't have fit the typical volume size. Apparently this is the thickest book they've ever published...!

The revised manuscript was really pushing the page limit, so they worked hard to increase the number of characters I could use to make sure the end of each chapter fit on the page. This book isn't quite the same as the web novel version, so I hope my usual readers will enjoy reading the fresh take on the story.

Misato's past is a focal point yet again in this book, as is the distance Ryouji feels between himself and other people. I got to explore the conflict that arose from both of those things and show a lot more of what goes on inside their heads. Several new characters appeared this time around, and they got their fair share of exploration, too—whether they were struggling, seeking answers, or running around fighting. I hope there's something within the characters' journeys that can be of help to some of you.

So many people were involved in making this book possible. For one, I'd like to thank Mr. Ohara from Dasai Shrine for helping me gather materials and providing me with information. I learned so much that I never would have found on my own. I'd also like to thank everyone who encouraged me to keep writing, whether during the web series or for the printed book. I never could have done this without you!

Then, of course, I have to thank Yone Kazuki and Yoshinao Ooka, who worked so hard on the cover design. I absolutely love how they gave the sky in the background such a wintry feel. I could

stare at it forever... Speaking of which, Shirota and the famous red Town Hall jacket finally got their illustration debut!

And last but not least, I'd like to thank my editor Onaka, who supported me even when I panicked and rambled about a lot of stuff. I'm sorry for always talking your ear off, but...really, thank you.

Finally, I have some huge news: *Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes* will be published as a manga! Mito-sensei will be in charge of illustrating the story. Between the book cover and the manga art, I'm absolutely spoiled...! Never in my wildest dreams did I think an artist I've been following for a while would turn my very own story into a manga. I hope everyone's excited to see Misato and Ryouji at their handsomest! I'm also very pleased to say that the photographer Doumin no Hito (@North_ern2 on Twitter) provided us with landscape photos to use as a reference for the manga. Even as someone who lives in the town, I find Doumin's shots of it so intimate and stunning. I received some photos to use as a reference for my writing in the future, too. I'll definitely be making good use of them.

Lastly, all I can say is that I hope I'll be blessed with another opportunity to meet you all again.

Yoshiko Utamine
November 2021



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